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Early College Connections:

An Investigation of First-Year, Persisting, Full-Time and Part-time Students'

Perceptions at a Suburban Community College

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Early College Connections:

An Investigation of First-Year, Persisting, Full-Time and Part-time Students' Perceptions at a Suburban Community College

by

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Treatise

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Dedication

This treatise is dedicated to the four most courageous women I have ever known: my mother, grandmother, and two sisters. Being loved by such compassionate, caring, and fiercely independent women gave me the resolve to expect more from myself.

Acknowledgements

I may have put pen to paper, but I am clear that I did not accomplish this goal alone. Thank you to the family members, mentors, confidants, friends, fellow Blockers, and prayer warriors who walked with me from start to finish.

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Early College Connections:

An Investigation of First-Year, Persisting, Full-Time and Part-Time Students' Perceptions at a Suburban Community College

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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Nationally, nearly 40% of full-time community college students drop out before the second year, and drop-out rates for part-time students are even more astounding. In 2008, nearly 60% of part-time community college students dropped out before year two. As community colleges embrace President Obama's call for a 50% increase in completion by 2020, it is imperative that community college leaders find ways to retain and graduate students. A number of community and technical colleges utilize the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE) to quantitatively measure early campus connections. Building on the institutional early connection benchmark score, this study qualitatively describes first-year, persisting, full- and part-time students' perceptions of early campus experiences and the role that early connections play in their decision to persist. The study employs a qualitative research approach via a single case study. Twenty-four, first-year, second semester, consecutively enrolled, full- and part-time

students, who mirrored the college's population participated in semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Findings indicate that early connections, as defined by the SENSE were not instrumental in persistence; however, a number of other factors were impactful: academic support; social influences; family support; and academic success. This study may provide information that will enhance the understanding of community college student perceptions related to factors that encourage persistence, and it may provide community colleges that operate within similar conditions, resources, and constraints with useful information as they design early connection strategies.

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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

In an effort to meet the United States' current economic challenges and impending employment needs, on July 14, 2009, President Obama announced the American Graduation Initiative (AGI). The president called on community colleges to graduate five million additional students with degrees and certificates that would equip them for the employment needs of the 21st century economy and close the skills gap in the United States (American Graduation Initiative, 2009). President Obama's announcement of the American Graduation Initiative (2009) put the spotlight squarely on community colleges:

> Time and again, when we have placed our bet for the future on education, we have prospered as a result – by tapping the incredible innovative and generative potential of a skilled American workforce...At the start of my administration, I set a goal for America: by 2020, this nation will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world…Today, I am announcing the most significant down payment yet on reaching this goal in the next ten years. It's called the American Graduation Initiative. It will reform and strengthen community colleges from coast to coast so that they get the resources that students and schools need—and the results workers and businesses demand. Through this plan, we seek to help an additional five million Americans earn degrees and certificates in the next decade. (AGI, B. Obama, paras. 2-3)

With the current economic crisis, community colleges are facing unmanageable increases in enrollment, funding cuts, greater competition for federal, state, and local dollars, and immense pressure to support the American Graduation Initiative, which has become more widely known as the "Completion Agenda." Simultaneously, community colleges are being asked to remain committed to access, quality, and opportunity. Given the extraordinary expectations, the ability to measure and meet performance expectations has become imperative. According to McClenney (2009):

> The reality for community colleges is this: No matter how good our colleges are today—and they do contribute mightily to educational access, work-force development, and economic prosperity—they simply are not yet good enough. Our results, particularly when stated in terms of student achievement, are not adequate to serve the pressing needs of individual students, communities, states, and the nation. (p. A60)

Today, community colleges in the United States enroll 7.1 million students annually (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2011). There is a community or technical college within reach of 90% of the population (National Commission on Community Colleges, 2008), and 95% of community colleges have an open-door admission policy, which means that students do not compete for admission and are not required to demonstrate academic proficiency (Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

Nationally, 50% of community college students drop out before the second year (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2010a). In 2008, 39%

of full-time students dropped out before year two (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2011), and dropout rates for part-time students, who comprise 60% of all community college enrollment (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011), are even more astounding. Sixty percent of first-time enrolled students, who attended part-time in 2008, did not return the following year (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2011).

In an effort to improve early student engagement that leads to learning and persistence, 197 colleges in 37 states have invited 91,000 students to participate in the Survey of Entering Student Engagement [SENSE] (CCCSE, 2010b). Based on extensive research pertaining to effective educational practices, the survey is designed to help community and technical colleges focus on the "front door" experiences that affect entering student persistence in the first year. In participating community and technical colleges, the survey is administered in the fourth and fifth weeks of fall semester classes to gauge students' earliest campus experiences (CCCSE, 2010a).

According to CCCSE (2010c), "Research shows that the more actively engaged students are—with college faculty and staff, with other students, and with the subject matter—the more likely they are to learn and to achieve their academic goals" (para. 2). Kuh (2007) agrees that "a key to academic success for students is their engagement…and by being engaged—something not represented in outcome measures—students develop habits that promise to stand them in good stead for a lifetime of continuous learning" (p. 1).

The way students interact with and perceive their connection to the campus environment is an important factor in understanding students' levels of engagement. According to SENSE data:

> When students describe their early college experiences, they typically reflect on occasions when they felt discouraged or thought about dropping out. Their reasons for persisting almost always include one common element: a strong, early connection to someone at the college. (CCCSE, 2010d, para. 1)

The Survey of Entering Student Engagement uses benchmarking to measure institutional practices and student behaviors that promote early engagement related to student learning and persistence. "Benchmarking is the systematic process of comparing an organization's performance on key measures to the performance of others. This process typically emphasizes comparing one's performance not just to a performance average but to an objective standard of excellence" (CCCSE, 2010b, p. 2). The SENSE benchmark scores are derived from groups of conceptually related survey items that address key areas of student engagement. Research has shown that the answers to these survey items reflect important aspects of entering students' college experiences and educational outcomes (CCCSE, 2010b). Participating community colleges receive a score for each benchmark, and the entire set of scores is standardized for individual college and cohort comparison purposes (CCCSE, 2010b).

In an effort to focus resources on practices that work, benchmarks assist colleges in establishing baselines, setting goals, monitoring progress, and comparing their

performance to other similar or high-performing groups of colleges, as well as the national average, for a rolling three-year cohort (CCCSE, 2010a). The survey utilizes benchmarks to measure six early engagement indicators: early connections, high expectations and aspirations, clear academic plan and pathway, effective track to college readiness, engaged learning, and academic and social support network (CCCSE, 2010a).

In 2010, 172 colleges in 35 states participated in the SENSE. Overall early connection key findings for the 2010 SENSE cohort, which are outlined below, provide some general insights regarding students' positive and negative early college experiences.

Key findings indicate that 72% of entering students felt welcome the first time they came to the campus, but 25% were neutral; 49% agree or strongly agree that their college provided information about financial assistance, but 25% disagree or strongly disagree; 34% agree or strongly agree that a staff member helped them determine whether they qualified for assistance, but 39% disagree or strongly agree; 44% say that someone other than an instructor learned their name, but 37% disagree or strongly disagree; and only 24% say that someone was specifically assigned to them so they could see that person each time they needed assistance (CCCSE, 2010c).

There is ample research to suggest that when students connect to various aspects of the campus environment, they are more likely to persist (Astin 1975, 1977, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Pascarella, Duby, &

Iverson, 1983; Spady, 1970, 1971; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Although the majority of these studies are geared toward traditional, 18- to 24 year-old university students, they do provide a valuable framework for understanding that student persistence is linked to a sense of identity, a sense of mattering, and positive engagement with peers, faculty, and the campus environment (Gibson & Slate, 2010).

Gibson and Slate (2010) believe that helping first-year students is critical to retention:

> Assisting all first-year students in their persistence toward degree completion is essential and imperative…student attrition is associated with low levels of engagement, low levels of satisfaction with college experiences, and minimal amounts of participation in educationally purposeful activities. (p. 373)

Engaging students early is an important step toward persistence and completion. Helping students succeed through the first 12-15 credit hours significantly improves long-term success in course, certificate, and degree completion (CCCSE, 2010a).

Statement of the Problem

Nationally, part-time students comprise 60% of community college enrollment (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2011), and yet over 70% do not persist to their intended goal (Chen & Carroll, 2007). In 2008, 60% of part-time community college students left after the first year (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2011). Full-time community college students persist at higher rates, but for those who began college

in 2005, only 27% of first-time, full-time students completed a degree or certificate within three years (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2011).

Over the past four decades, retention and persistence studies and models have yielded tremendous insights about student persistence (Astin 1975, 1977, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Spady, 1970, 1971; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993); however, these studies/models focused primarily on the experiences of residential, four-year university students. All aspects of a university experience are not applicable to the community college, and within the community college setting, experiences of part-time and full-time students are unique.

As community colleges commit to the Completion Agenda and work toward student success, increasing persistence is critical. Engagement is a key factor in persistence, and measuring early connections as a component of engagement provides institutions with an opportunity to gauge the earliest college experiences. If persistence is the goal, it is imperative that institutions take a closer look at individual student perceptions associated with early campus experiences. With almost 50% of community college students dropping out after the first year (CCCSE, 2010a), it is important to thoroughly examine first-year, persisting students' perceptions of early connection strategies that enhance engagement and lead to persistence.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to qualitatively describe first-year, persisting, part-time and full-time students' perceptions about the role that early connections, as defined by the Survey of Entering Student Engagement, play in their decisions to persist. The survey defines early connections, in general, as those experiences from the time of a student's decision to attend college through the end of the first three weeks of the first semester or quarter (CCCSE, 2010a). For purposes of this study, the conceptually related items on the SENSE, which are used to measure how connected students are to the campus, were used as the foundation for further investigation.

SENSE items:

1. The very first time I came to this college I felt welcome;
2. The college provided me with adequate information about financial assistance (scholarships, grants, loans, etc.);
3. A college staff member helped me determine whether I qualified for financial assistance;
4. At least one college staff member (other than an instructor) learned my name; and
5. Thinking about your experiences from the time of your decision to attend this college through the end of the semester or quarter, respond (answering yes or no): A specific person was assigned to me so I could see him/her each time I needed information or assistance (CCCSE, 2010d, paras. 2-3).

Using these conceptually related items, which yield an early connections institutional benchmark score, provided the impetus for conducting a qualitative study. The study focused on qualitatively describing first-year, persisting, full-time and part-time students' perceptions of early connections at a suburban community college.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of first-year, persisting full- and part-time students about the role of early campus connections in their decision to persist?

    a. What are first-year, persisting, full-time students' perceptions of early campus connections?

    b. What are first-year, persisting, part-time students' perceptions of early campus connections?

    c. What are the notable differences in the perceptions reported by first-year, persisting, full- and part-time students regarding early campus connections?

Brief Overview of Methodology

The study followed qualitative research guidelines and employed a case study approach. According to Merriam (1988), "Qualitative inquiry is inductive—focusing on process, understanding, and interpretation—rather than deductive and experimental" (p. 21). The case study approach provides a rich, thick description of a phenomenon (Merriam, 1988) and provides the researcher an opportunity to gather data on a particular phenomenon within its context (Yin, 2003).

Qualitative research seeks to gain insight and understanding of how people experience the world and is grounded in interpretivism (Willis, 2007). This philosophical approach is based on the assumption that human beings view the world

they live in with unique perspectives, and there is something to be gained from exploring those perceptions (Willis, 2007). Using an interpretive lens, data will be collected using qualitative research methods such as interviewing, focus groups, and document analysis.

Definition of Terms

Attrition—loss or reduction of student population.

Benchmark—"Benchmarking is the systematic process of comparing an organization's performance on key measures to the performance of others. This process typically emphasizes comparing one's performance not just to a performance average but to an objective standard of excellence" (CCCSE, 2010b, p. 2).

Early connections—"those experiences from the time of a student's decision to attend the college through the end of the first three weeks of the first semester or quarter" (CCCSE, 2010a, para. 2).

First-time enrolled—classification for students who are attending any college for the first time.

First-year—classification for students who are enrolled either full-time or part-time in their first year.

Full-time student—student enrolled in 12 or more credit-bearing hours per semester.

Part-time student—student enrolled in less than 12 credit-bearing hours per semester.

Persisting student—student enrolled either full-time or part-time in his/her second consecutive semester of credit bearing coursework.

Persistence—returning to college for a subsequent semester.

Retention—returning to college for a subsequent academic year.

Student success—completion of a certificate or an associate degree.

SENSE survey—Based on extensive retention and student support research, SENSE is designed to help community and technical colleges focus on the "front door" experiences that affect entering student persistence in the first year. In participating community and technical colleges, SENSE is administered in the fourth and fifth weeks of the fall semester classes to gauge students' earliest campus experiences (CCCSE, 2010a).

Student engagement—"the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 683).

Limitations

The qualitative approach was employed via a case study. The study was designed to qualitatively describe perceptions related to early connections as defined by the Survey of Entering Student Engagement for a single community college; therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other higher education institutions or specifically relate to the way that other institutions choose to measure early engagement. A purposeful, but small sample of interviews and focus groups with persisting, part-time and full-time students may not represent all members of either of those enrollment classifications.

Delimitations

All six of the SENSE benchmarks are integral to learning about early engagement; however, this study only focused on first-year, persisting student perceptions of early connections. The study did not investigate the remaining five benchmarks: high expectations and aspirations, clear academic plan and pathway, effective track to college readiness, engaged learning, and academic and social support network. Only first-year, persisting, full-time and part-time students, who were enrolled in their second consecutive semester of credit-bearing classes, were interviewed for this study.

Assumptions

The researcher entered the study with several assumptions that are based on prior professional experience and knowledge of the community college setting. First, the researcher assumed that positive early connections may contribute to student engagement. Second, the researcher assumed that students would answer focus group and interview questions honestly and without reservation. Lastly, the researcher assumed that interview responses, although limited in scope, would be generally representative of part-time and full-time students' perceptions.

Significance of the Study

Currently, the prominent retention models are based on traditional age, residential, university students (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985 Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993), and according to Bailey and

Alfonso (2005), "The lack of research on community colleges is a particularly serious problem when it comes to the study of retention" (p. 8). In addition, Laird and Cruce (2009) argue that there is little research dedicated specifically to the experiences of part-time students. "Given the significant presence of part-time students within higher education, the dearth of empirical research relating to part-time students and the institutions they attend is problematic" (p. 290).

This study may provide information that will enhance the understanding of community college student perceptions related to early connections, and it may also provide insights about how perceptions differ between part-time and full-time students. In addition, the study may provide community colleges that operate within similar conditions, resources, and constraints with useful information as they design early connection strategies.

Summary

Chapter one provided a brief overview of the national expectation that has been set to increase student success, the challenges that community colleges are facing with regard to persistence for both full-time and part-time students, and an explanation of the SENSE instrument that 172 community and technical colleges used in 2010 to measure early engagement of entering students. This study sought to qualitatively describe the perceptions of persisting, part-time and full-time students with regard to early campus connections as defined by the Survey of Entering Student Engagement.

Chapter two will provide an overview of the current educational and economic context, discuss relevant engagement, persistence, and retention literature, and provide information about the enrollment characteristics of students.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

In 2009, President Obama called on the nation's community colleges to increase graduation rates 50% by the year 2020. Reaching this goal would mean that five million more community college students would graduate with a certificate or degree by 2020 and be prepared for employment designed to stimulate the United States' economy.

Nationally, community colleges enroll nearly half of the undergraduates in the United States (AACC, 2011), and yet nearly 50% do not persist to the second year (CCCSE, 2010a). Concerns about retention have been around for decades, but as community colleges settle into their newly appointed role as economic catalyst for the 21st century, they are facing immense pressure to produce graduates who are able to positively contribute to much-needed employment growth and economic gains.

Traditionally, community colleges have focused on institutional access as a mechanism for increasing enrollment, but according to Bumphus, "Today's community colleges need two open doors—access and completion. The access door is historic, but the completion door has not been open wide enough" (personal communication, April 9, 2011). While institutions are propping the completion door open, they must begin to acknowledge that student retention is a global issue. Lack of retention negatively impacts students and the economy, but it also dramatically affects the institution's bottom line. As the economy remains sluggish and higher education budgets continue to

experience cuts, it is time that community college leaders begin to focus more intently on retaining students.

There are a number of foundational retention models which indicate that students who develop strong connections to the institutional environment are more likely to persist (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1993; Pascarella,1980; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993), and the longer students persist, the more likely they are to complete programs. As community college leaders embrace the Completion Agenda while holding firmly to the "open door," it is becoming increasingly important to make stronger connections with new students. Before students reach the classroom to embark on their educational goals, first, they must navigate the myriad of processes and procedures that provide access to the institution. According to Upcraft and Gardner (1989), "The freshman's most critical transition period occurs during the first two to six weeks," and "the quality and responsiveness of faculty and staff may be the most powerful resources available for improving student success and persistence" (p. 66). Creating positive "front door" experiences for students may very well be the key to developing meaningful connections that encourage students to commit to and complete an educational journey that not only leads to a brighter future, but has far-reaching economic implications for the entire nation.

The Completion Agenda

According to President Obama, increasing educational attainment will begin to upright the downward economic spiral:

> Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but one that helps us thrive and compete in a global economy. It's time to reform our community colleges so that they provide Americans of all ages a chance to learn the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for the jobs of the future. (AGI, para. 6)

Community colleges are well known for the opportunity they provide the most academically and socioeconomically vulnerable students. Today, there are 1,167 community colleges in the United States (AACC, 2011), which enroll 7.1 million students annually (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2011). There is a community or technical college within reach of 90% of the population (National Commission on Community Colleges, 2008), and 95% of community colleges have an "open door" admission policy, which means that students do not compete for admission and are not required to demonstrate academic proficiency (Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

Nationally, community colleges serve nearly half of the undergraduates in this country (AACC, 2011), but almost 50% of students drop out after the first year (CCCSE, 2010). Currently, part-time students comprise 60% of overall community college enrollment, yet there is little, if any, national discussion about the best way to retain and graduate these students (K. McClenney, personal communication, June 20, 2011). As

both full- and part-time enrollment continues to increase (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), it will be important for community college leaders to find ways to help students meet their educational goals. Given that the majority of new jobs will require higher education and workforce training (The White House, 2010), the country's economic future may very well depend on it.

Educational and Economic Landscape

To maintain and create jobs, which will lead to economic recovery and stability, employers must have access to an educated workforce. Occupations that require an associate degree are expected to increase twice as fast as jobs that do not require any education beyond high school (The White House, 2010, p. 1). If the United States is to remain competitive in preparing the workforce for high-wage, high-skill careers that are in demand in the global economy, more students must be engaged in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

> According to Leach (2010), there are not enough workers in these areas:
>
> Today, 67% of undergraduates in Singapore earn a degree in natural science or engineering, 50% in China, 47% in France, and 38% in South Korea, but only 15% of students in the U.S. earn these degrees. This leak in the STEM pipeline comes at a time when U.S. Department of Labor projections indicate that 15 of the 20 fastest growing occupations will require greater levels of STEM-related skills. However, while the number of jobs requiring significant STEM proficiency is growing, increasing numbers of students are choosing not to major

> in these disciplines. Should this trend continue, U.S. employers will find it more and more difficult to compete on the world stage, the economy will suffer, and citizens will face a lower standard of living. (pp. 2-3)

The National Science Foundation utilizes community colleges to train technicians who work in "agriculture, environmental technology, biotechnology, engineering technology, manufacturing, information technology, telecommunications, cybersecurity, and process technology" (Boggs, 2010, p. 3). Currently, more than half of the nation's registered nurses, the majority of other health care workers, and over 80% of first responders, are trained in community colleges (Boggs, 2010).

According to The White House (2010), "Over the next decade, nearly 8 in 10 new jobs will require higher education and workforce training" (p. 1), and as educational attainment increases, median lifetime earnings also increase. According to Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah (2010), having some higher education beyond high school adds nearly $250,000 to median lifetime earnings, and "postsecondary education has become the threshold requirement for a middle-class family income" (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010, p. 3). As economic needs have changed over the last 30 years, employers have demanded more education, and the middle class is no longer in the middle (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010).

The current recession hit Americans hard, but those working in high-paying, low-skilled jobs have been dealt an even more substantial blow. Once plentiful, these jobs are becoming scarce. Since the recession began in 2007, over 7.8 million jobs have

been lost, and approximately one-third of those laid off have been unemployed for more than six months. By 2018, nearly 650,000 low-skilled manufacturing, farming, fishing, and forestry jobs are expected to be automated or shipped overseas for cheaper labor costs (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). What will remain are high-skill/high-wage and low-skill/low-wage jobs. The high-skill/high-wage jobs support the middle or upper class, and workers who are in low-skill/low-wage jobs will become the working poor (Lumina Foundation, 2010). As of July 2011, there were three million job openings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011a), and yet the unemployment rate continued to hover at 9.1% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011b).

By 2018, projections indicate that there will be 46.8 million job openings—13.8 million new jobs and 33 million replacement jobs. Nearly two-thirds of these jobs will require workers with at least some college (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Currently, as many jobs go unfilled, and future jobs are expected to require skills obtained through postsecondary education, colleges are struggling to retain and graduate students.

According to U.S. Census data, as reported by the Lumina Foundation, the degree attainment rate for black students ages 25-64 is 26.2%, Hispanic students 18.6%, American Indian students 22.5%, Asian/Pacific Islander students 59.3%, and Caucasian students 42.2% (Lumina Foundation, 2010). Based on degree attainment among older adults (55-64), the United States ranks first; however, based on degree attainment for the

young adult population (ages 24-35), the United States ranks twelfth (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010).

While President Obama calls for a 50% increase in college completion and the recession continues, "colleges are drowning in a flood of unready applicants. More than half the new students arriving at community colleges today lack the necessary skills in reading or math to proceed with their education" (McCusker, 2010, p. 3). According to Roueche, "The great majority of students enrolling in community colleges require remediation…and most community colleges function as emergency rooms for many of their entering students" (CCCSE, 2010e, p. 2). Goldrick-Rab (2010) notes that 61% of students at community colleges take at least one remedial course, and 25% take two or more.

According to data from Achieving the Dream (2006), certain characteristics reduce a student's chances of completing a college program:

- Delayed enrollment after high school graduation
- Lack of a high school diploma
- Part-time enrollment
- Full-time work (at least 30 hours a week)
- Financial independence from one's parents
- Dependents other than a spouse
- Single parenthood

> More than 70% of community college students face at least one of these impeding challenges, and half have two or more at play in their lives. Low-income students and students of color are especially likely to have these characteristics. (p. 1)

In 2008, 39% of full-time community college students dropped out before year two (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2011), and drop-out rates for part-time students, who comprise 60% of all community college enrollment (AACC, 2011), are even more remarkable. Sixty percent of first-time enrolled students, who attended part-time in 2008, did not return the following year (Aud, Hussar, & Kena, 2011).

While dropout rates have a long-term effect on students and the economy, they have an immediate financial impact on the community college. According to Levitz, Noel, and Richter (1999), institutional retention savings can be quite significant. Using the Noel Levitz Group retention formula, Sydow and Sandel (1998) reported that, "the net revenue gained by retaining one first-year student to graduation amounted to $4,025" (p. 635). In the 1998 study, reducing first-to-second year attrition rates by only 10% would save the institution approximately $94,500. Given the current fiscal and economic climate, retention is an essential investment strategy that can improve the institution's bottom line while making a profound impact in the lives of the very people who community colleges were created to serve.

Enrollment Characteristics of Students

Community college students are as diverse as the community college mission. The "open door" provides opportunities for students of all ages, educational backgrounds, and walks of life to attend. Today, the average age of community college students is 28, 39% of students are 21 or younger, 45% are between the ages of 22 and 39, and 15% are over the age of 40 (AACC, 2011). Nationally, black students comprise 13%, Hispanic students 16%, Asian/Pacific Islanders 6%, American Indians 1%, and Caucasians makeup 64% of community college enrollment (AACC, 2011). Of those attending community colleges, 42% are first-generation and 45% are minorities (AACC, 2011). More women (58%) than men (42%) enroll in community colleges, and nearly half (46%) of community college students receive some form of financial aid (AACC, 2011).

Although individual students are unique, they are commonly characterized by their enrollment characteristics. Part-time and full-time students are often referred to as traditional, non-traditional, or first-generation.

Traditional students are typically defined as those students who enroll full-time in postsecondary education immediately following high school graduation, are financially dependent on their parents, and either do not work or work only part-time (Choy, 2002). In 1999-2000, traditional students were three times more likely to choose a public, four-year institution than attend a community college (Choy, 2002). In 2004, among all high school seniors, 17% of students from the highest socioeconomic status

and 44% from the lowest socioeconomic status enrolled in community colleges immediately following high school (Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

Unlike traditional or what many consider "typical" college students, Choy (2002) defines nontraditional students as having one or more of the following characteristics: delays postsecondary enrollment longer than one year after high school graduation; attends college part-time for at least a portion of the academic year; works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; is financially independent as defined by financial aid regulations; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma.

Horn (1996) also used these descriptors, but categorized nontraditional status based on the number of characteristics that the student possessed. Students who have one nontraditional characteristic are considered minimally nontraditional; students with two or three are considered moderately nontraditional; and students with three or more characteristics are considered highly nontraditional.

Nontraditional students are the most at risk of dropping out the first year, less likely to attain an associates or bachelors degree, and more likely to leave postsecondary education altogether (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Choy, 2002). In 1999-2000, 64% of students attending two-year colleges were highly nontraditional, 55% were moderately nontraditional, 39% were minimally nontraditional, and part-time attendance was the most common characteristic among minimally traditional students (Choy, 2002). According to Provasknik and Planty (2008), in 2003-2004, 73% of all undergraduates had one or more nontraditional characteristic, and in public two-year colleges, 89% of

students were at least minimally nontraditional, as compared to 58% at public four-year institutions and 50% at private not-for-profit, four-year institutions.

Like nontraditional students, first-generation students face a number of challenges with completing higher education. Chen and Carroll (2005) define first-generation students as those who are "the first members of their families to attend college" (p. iii). Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that first-generation students pursuing bachelor's degrees completed fewer credit hours each year and worked significantly more hours than their peers. Research indicates that these students are often Black or Hispanic, have difficulty accessing and completing higher education programs, and like nontraditional students, oftentimes, are less academically prepared and come from low-income families (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996).

Between 1992 and 2000, 22% of those who entered postsecondary education (2- or 4-year institutions) were first-generation students and nearly half (43%) left higher education without earning a degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005). During the same period, 54.9% of 12th graders with first-generation status entered two-year institutions, 44.5% attended part-time, and nearly 20% dropped out before the end of the first year. First-generation students face a number of challenges, and according to Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella and Nora (1996):

> First-generation students differ from their traditional peers in both the personal and educational characteristics they bring with them to college and in the nature

> of the experiences they have during their first year there. With few exceptions, first-generation students are at a disadvantage in those comparisons. Overall, the picture suggests these students come less well prepared and with more nonacademic demands on them, and they enter a world where they are less likely to experience many of the conditions that other research indicates are positively related to persistence, performance, and learning. (p. 18)

These students, whether part-time or full-time, often choose to begin their higher education journey at 2-year colleges. Currently, 42% of community college students meet the criteria for first-generation status (AACC, 2011).

Part-Time Students

Part-time students, in general, comprise the greatest percentage of community college enrollment, and these students are dropping out at alarming rates. Retention studies (Feldman, 1993; Laird & Cruce, 2009; O'Toole, Stratton, & Wetzel, 2003; Sadler, Cohen, & Kochesen, 1997; Tharp, 1998) indicate that enrolling part-time is considered a risk factor for collegiate success. According to Laird and Cruce (2009), there is little research being conducted specifically about the experiences of part-time students:

> Part-time students, those students enrolled in fewer credit hours than necessary to be considered full-time, are among those who have been largely ignored in the literature on college impacts…given the significant presence of part-time

students within higher education, the dearth of empirical research relating to part-time students and the institutions they attend is problematic. (p. 290)

Students have been enrolling part-time since the early 1970s, and the numbers continue to increase. Between 1970 and 1999, part-time enrollments increased over 200% from 1.1 million to 3.4 million (Kasper, 2002-03; Sorey & Duggan, 2008). O'Toole, Stratton, and Wetzel (2003) attribute part-time enrollment growth to three population groups: students 25 and older, students 18-24, and minorities.

Between 1970 and 1998, nontraditional students who were 25 and older comprised the largest segment of part-time enrollment, and according to O'Toole, et al., (2003), life-cycle factors such as marriage, divorce, children, and jobs were likely reasons for most students to attend part-time. Between 1970 and 1998, part-time enrollment for both men and women increased exponentially. Part-time enrollment of men increased 59%, and nearly half of the increase can be attributed to men 25 or older (Kasper, 2002-03). During this same period, greater numbers of women entered the workforce, and part-time enrollment of women increased 190%. Over 80% of the increase was among women who were 25 or older (Kasper, 2002-03).

Part-time enrollment for the second population group, the 18- to 24 year-olds, grew from 16.4% in 1970 (O'Toole et al., 2003) to 23% in 1999 (Kasper, 2002-03). During the same period, part-time minority enrollment grew from 16.5% to 28% (O'Toole et al., 2003).

In the 2003-04 cohort of all students, 64% of those who enrolled part-time attended public, two-year institutions and were more likely to be enrolled in an associate degree program (Chen & Carroll, 2007). Between 2008 and 2010, significant numbers of unemployed adults seeking job skills and traditional-age students interested in saving money enrolled in community colleges. During that time, overall part-time enrollment in community colleges increased 17% and the numbers are expected to continue to rise (McClure, 2010).

Chen and Carroll (2007) classified part-time students into two categories: part-time students who looked like full-time students and those who were exclusively part-time students. In 2003-04, part-time students who looked like full-time students made-up about 25% of part-time undergraduates, and these students exhibited at least two characteristics that are typically characterized by full-time enrollment. They were high school graduates aged 23 or younger and financially dependent on their parents.

According to Chen and Carroll (2007), this group of part-time students was more likely to be White, male, have educated parents, come from higher income families, and expected to earn an advanced degree. They were less likely to be Black or have taken remedial courses. Twenty-one percent worked full-time, and on average, students worked 26 hours a week. Although these students resembled typical full-time students in some respects, like exclusively part-time students, they tended to enroll in two-year colleges and have no declared major field of study (Chen & Carroll, 2007).

In 2003-04, when compared to full-time college students, those who attended exclusively part-time were older, female, Hispanic, financially independent, and first-generation. Eighty-three percent of all exclusively part-time students worked while attending college, and 53% worked full-time, averaging 35 hours a week. Within six years, at least 70% of students who started college at a public, two-year institution, and worked either part-time or full-time, had left the institution with no certificate or degree (Skomsvold, Radford, Berkner, & Hunt-White, 2011).

In 2003-04, 63% of part-time students worked to help pay educational and living expenses; 24% worked for spending money; and 7% worked to gain job skills. As compared to 59% of full-time students, 72% of exclusively part-time students worked to pay educational and living expenses.

Regardless of a student's demographic and family background, academic preparation, enrollment, and employment characteristics, part-time enrollment was negatively associated with long-term postsecondary outcomes (Chen & Carroll, 2007). Within six years, only 5.5% of exclusively part-time students enrolled in a 2-year college in 2003-04 had completed a degree or certificate; none had obtained a bachelor's degree; and 73% of all part-time students were no longer enrolled in the community college. Sixty-nine percent of exclusively part-time students who left a 2-year college never enrolled in another institution (Skomsvold, Radford, Berkner, & Hunt-White, 2011).

A study conducted by Feldman (1993), which focused on identifying early predictors of attrition, found that part-time students were 2.23 times more likely to drop out than full-time students. Sadler, Cohen, and Kochesen (1997) and Tharp (1998) also found that taking fewer credit hours per semester was negatively correlated with persistence. Laird and Cruce (2009) report that part-time students are less engaged in educationally purposeful activities than full-time students and spend more time participating in off-campus activities such as working and caring for family.

Foundational Retention Studies

As part-time and full-time enrollment continues to increase (U.S. Department of Education, 2008), it is imperative that community college leaders find meaningful ways to engage students and increase persistence. There are a number of theoretical models which focus on persistence (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993), and for approximately 40 years, these seminal studies, which are based primarily on traditional-age, full-time students in four-year, residential colleges and universities, have served as the foundation for higher education retention research.

Given the significant differences between two-year and four-year higher education settings, there is concern about the studies' applicability to the community college environment. However, because there are relatively few research studies devoted specifically to retention in the community college (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Sorey & Duggan, 2008; Wild & Ebbers, 2002; Zhai & Monzon, 2001), these models continue to

provide the foundation for exploring institutional factors that are empirically linked to student persistence.

Spady (1970/1971) model of undergraduate dropout process. Spady's (1970) model, which was one of the earliest higher education student attrition models, was rooted in Durkheim's theory on suicide. Durkheim (1951) found that individuals who were unable to successfully integrate into society and affiliate with others were more likely to withdraw and experience suicidal tendencies. Spady (1970) used Durkheim (1951) as a basis to examine the role of student integration into higher education.

Spady (1970) proposed that four independent variables (grade performance, intellectual development, normative congruence, and friendship support) would influence a fifth independent variable (social integration), and all five would be linked to a student's decision to drop out. Based on the model, a greater level of social integration would increase student satisfaction and increase institutional commitment. Ultimately, higher levels of institutional commitment would reduce a student's likelihood of dropping out.

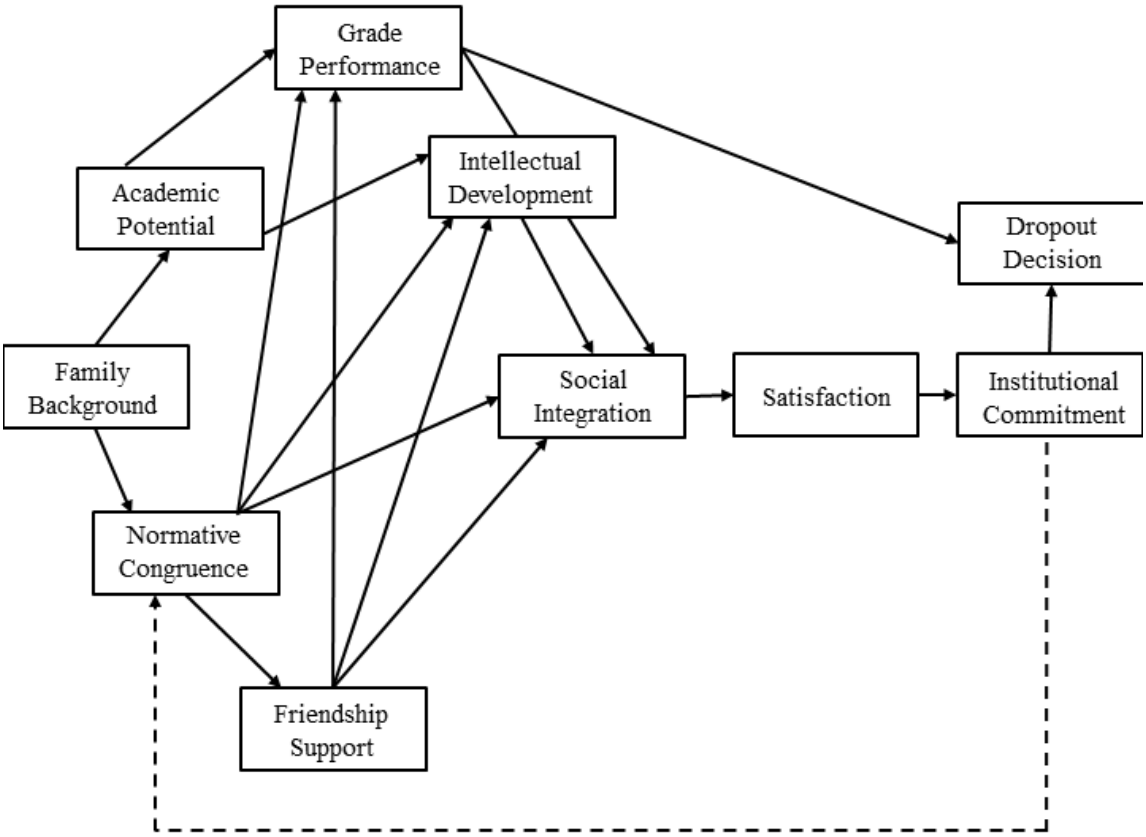

Figure 1. Theoretically Based Model of the Undergraduate Dropout Process (Spady, 1970)

Spady (1971) tested the model via a longitudinal study of 683 first-year students enrolled in the University of Chicago. Students in the sample were diverse with regard to ethnicity, religious affiliation, regional, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds; however, they were all selected for admission by the University of Chicago based on high school academic excellence. Two-thirds attended high schools that had a 50% university/4-year college going rate; more than a third ranked in the top 2% of their

graduating class; and two-thirds scored above the 90th percentile on the ACT in mathematics and verbal aptitude.

Spady (1971) used the following variables: (1) family background, (2) normative congruence, (3) academic potential, (4) friendship support, (5) intellectual development, (6) grade performance, (7) social integration, (8) institutional commitment, (9) first-year dropouts, and (10) graduation rates to test the model. According to Spady (1971):

> When all variables were considered simultaneously, grade performance is clearly the most important component of the dropout process for men, followed in order by institutional commitment, social integration, extremes in independence from one's family, friendship support, and majoring in natural science rather than the humanities field. For the women, however, institutional commitment has by far the most consistent net effect on first-year attrition. It is followed by being a natural science major, having high rather than low intellectual development, earning low grades, having unsatisfactory faculty contacts, being Gentile, having extreme intellectual interests, and reflecting extreme dispositions toward personal autonomy. (p. 54)

According to Spady (1971), first-year attrition factors varied for men and women; however, long-term academic performance played a dominant role for both genders. It may be important to note that prior to enrolling in college, the students selected for the study were high academic achievers.

Tinto (1975) model of institutional departure. Tinto's (1975) model continues to be the most widely recognized, influential, and tested student attrition model in higher education (Summers, 2003). Tinto developed a model to explain how a student's interaction with the collegiate environment influenced persistence. Tinto, building on Spady's (1970) application of Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide and Van Gennep's (1960) study of rites of passage in tribal societies, argues that the degree to which an individual is rooted in academic and social aspects of the university affects his/her decision to persist.

Students come to institutions with a variety of skills, abilities, and attributes, and these characteristics coupled with subsequent formal and informal interactions with members of the college (faculty, staff, students, administrators) either positively or negatively impact a student's integration into the educational environment. Tinto (1975) suggests:

> Positive integration serves to raise one's goals and strengthen one's commitments both to those goals and to the institution…negative experiences…those that separate the individual from the social and intellectual communities of the college or do not lead to sufficient integration in those communities, may lead to departure. (p. 116)

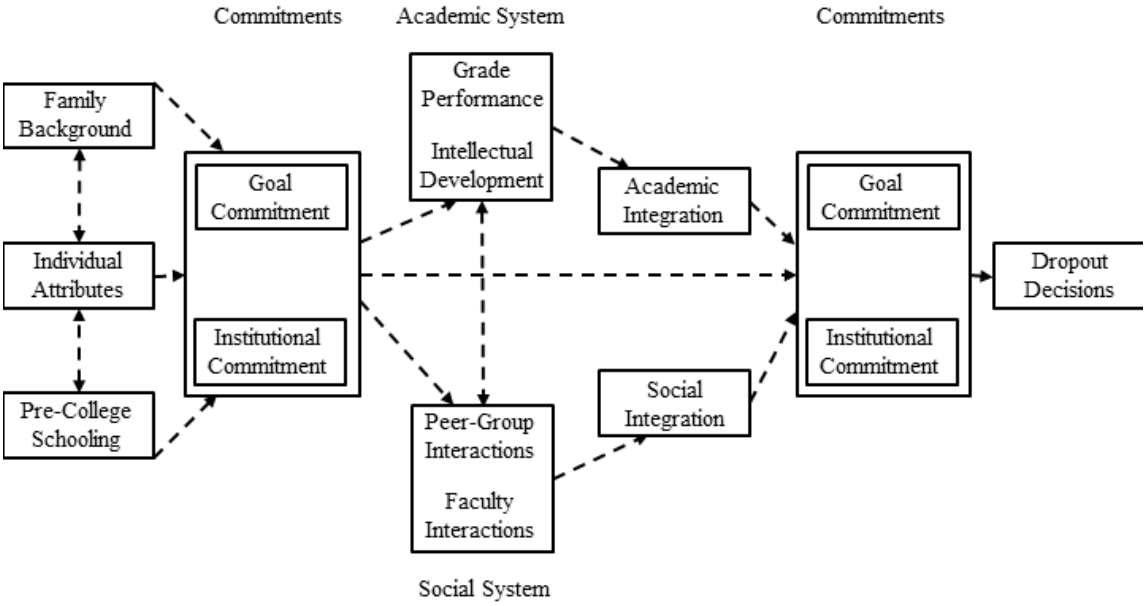

Figure 2. Theoretical Model of College Withdrawal (Tinto, 1975)

For over 40 years, Tinto (1975) has been considered the leading authority on retention; however, when tested, his model receives mixed reviews. Pascarella & Terenzina (1977) found the model to be predictive of student attrition; however, when tested in nonresidential, commuter environments, Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson (1983) found that only parts of the model were predictive, and Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson (1997) found that the model was not predictive.

Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson (1983) suggested reconceptualization of Tinto (1975). Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson (1983) tested Tinto (1975) in a nonresidential, university setting, added an additional variable (intention), and reconceptualized the model. Pascarella et al., (1983) was predicated on the assumption that because commuter students spend less time on campus and have greater demands on

their time outside of the institution, factors that contribute to student attrition in commuter institutions may not be the same in 4-year, residential settings.

Based on a two-year, longitudinal study, Pascarella et al., (1983) found that portions of Tinto's model functioned according to expectation; however, there were dimensions that did not. Intention, student background characteristics, and academic integration positively influenced persistence, but social integration, which was central to Tinto (1975), did not hold true for commuter students.

Pascarella et al., (1983) reasoned that commuter institutions may be significantly less likely to provide opportunities for such interaction than residential institutions. "Thus, when applied to commuter institution samples, the social integration component of the model may have an influence quite different from that initially hypothesized by Tinto" (p. 97).

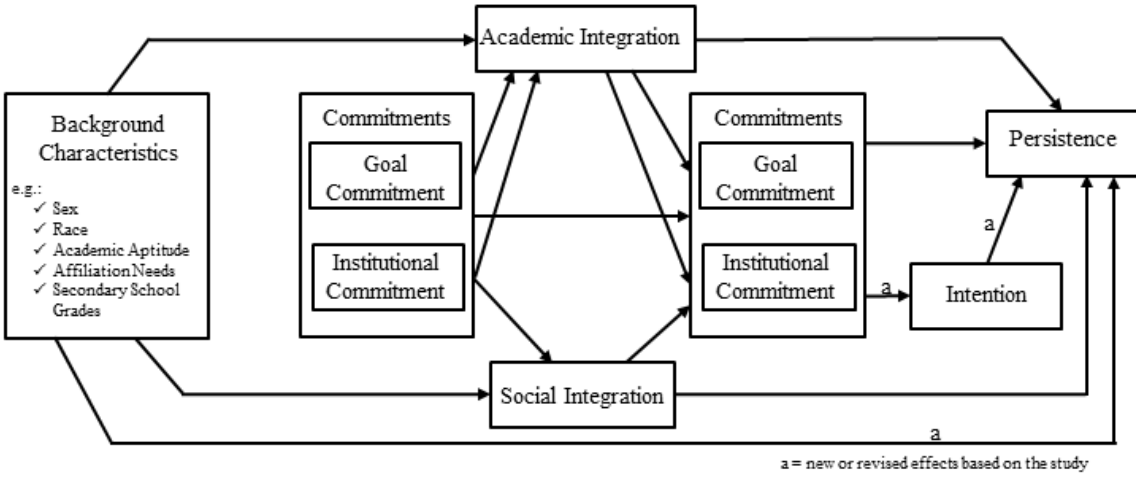

Figure 3. Suggested Reconceptualization of Tinto's Model (Pascarella, et al., 1983)

According to Pascarella et al., (1983), Tinto's model is most useful for explaining persistence and withdrawal in traditional, residential, university settings; however, in commuter settings, it may be important to consider additional variables and/or reconfigure the relationship among existing variables. Intention, which was added to the reconceptualized model, became important in subsequent persistence research.

Based on various components of Tinto (1975), Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson (1997) identified 13 testable propositions and found that, in residential settings, three reliable relationships are interrelated and meaningful: (1) The greater the degree of social integration, the greater the level of subsequent commitment to the institution; (2) The initial level of commitment to the institution also affects the students' subsequent commitment to the institution; and (3) Subsequent commitment to the institution positively affects the likelihood of student persistence in college. However, in commuter settings, Braxton, et al., (1997) found that the propositions did not apply. "We label none of the 13 propositions of Tinto's theory as reliable knowledge in commuter colleges and universities" (p. 122). Braxton, et al., (1997) recommended that residential colleges and universities institute mandatory orientation programs, require students to live on campus, and offer first-year students a myriad of opportunities to connect with others.

Using nearly 20 years of additional research, in 1993, Tinto introduced a more comprehensive model of student departure. Moving from descriptive to explanatory, the newly updated model is interactional and longitudinal. Tinto (1993) takes into account

how adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning, and external commitments influence student departure.

While managing a variety of external responsibilities, students with varying educational, family, and community backgrounds come to an institution, which is composed of academic and social communities which embody their own values and expectations.

According to Tinto (1993):

> The model argues that individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institutions. (p. 113)

In the model, congruence of a student's intentions, goals, intellectual and social orientation, academic performance, formal and informal faculty and staff contact, peer interactions, and social integration, as well as external responsibilities, influences institutional commitment.

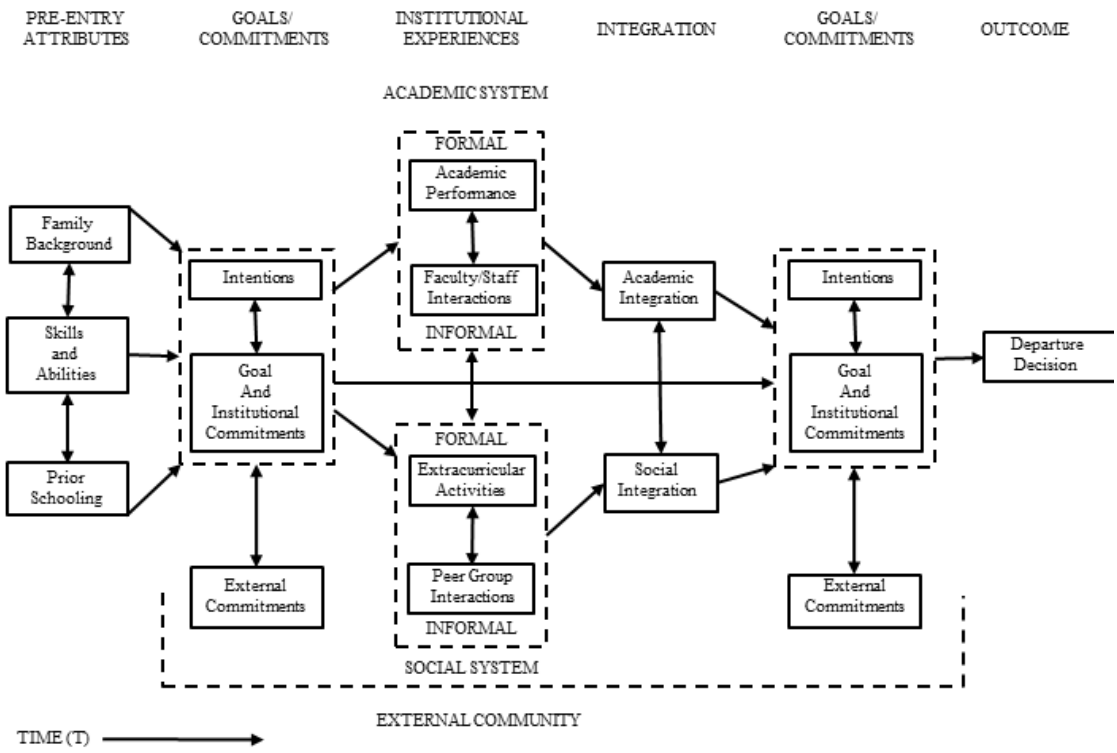

Figure 4. A Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure (Tinto, 1993)

Tinto (1993) posits:

> In its full form, our model of student institutional departure sees the process of persistence as being marked over time by different stages in the passage of students from past forms of association to new forms of membership in the social and intellectual communities of the college. Eventual persistence requires that individuals make the transition to college and become incorporated into its ongoing social and intellectual life. (pp. 135-136)

Tinto (1993) goes on to discuss the importance of defining dropouts and developing effective retention programs that reflect the institution's mission. Students

enroll in higher education for a variety of reasons and not all who choose to leave should be labeled dropouts.

Astin (1975, 1977, 1993) student involvement model. Astin is well known for his work related to student involvement and persistence in higher education. Using the I-E-O (Input-Environment-Outcome) Model as a conceptual framework for studying student outcomes, Astin conducted the first longitudinal, multi-institutional study of college dropouts. Astin (1975) focused primarily on predicting college dropout proneness related to student and institutional characteristics, and subsequent studies (Astin, 1977; 1993) were designed to identify environmental factors that positively contribute to student persistence in college.

In the fall of 1968, Astin conducted a quantitative, longitudinal, and multi-institutional study of 41,356 entering freshman to predict dropout proneness. Students from a representative national sample of 358 two- and four-year colleges and universities completed a 175-item survey designed to gather background information. Students were asked questions such as age, sex, race, religion, educational and career plans, past achievements, study habits, life goals, daily activities, reasons for choosing the college, sources of financial aid, expectations about completing college (estimates of dropping out temporarily or permanently), and parent's income, education, and occupation. Four years later, students completed a follow-up questionnaire, which included questions about their educational progress since entering college, the number of

years of undergraduate attendance, where they lived each year since entering college, and the types of jobs held.

Background data from questionnaires combined with SAT and ACT scores were used to develop quantitative estimates of a student's chances of dropping out of college. In addition, attempts were made to identify environmental experiences (alternative types of financial aid, work experience, residence and campus environment, institutional characteristics, "fit" between the student and institutional environment) that further increased the likelihood of a student dropping out.

The study indicated that most dropout prone freshman are those with poor high school academic records and ability, low aspirations, poor study habits, relatively uneducated parents, and small town backgrounds. Environmental factors that most closely influence dropout are financial aid, employment, campus environment, and characteristics of the college.

In addition to making good grades in college, scholarships, grants, and federal work-study were important factors in persistence; however, reliance on loans and savings decreased the chance of a student finishing college. Having a job increased the odds that a student would finish college; however, this was only true if students worked less than 20 hours a week. In general, full-time employment decreased persistence.

Moving away from home and living in a dormitory had a positive effect on persistence for men and women; however, for women, persistence decreased if they

lived in a private room. Participating in extracurricular activities such as honors programs, and fraternities or sororities also increased persistence.

In general, student persistence is related to the type of institution and degree of involvement students have with the campus environment. The institution with the lowest dropout rate (3%) was a highly selective, private-nonsectarian liberal arts college for women located in the Northeast, and the institutions with the highest dropout rate (8%) were both 2-year colleges—one private, located in the South, and the other, a large public college located in the West. Of the institution types in the study, the public, 2-year or community colleges consistently had the highest dropout rates (mean of approximately 59%), and dropout rates were somewhat higher in the West and Southwest:

> In contrast to the selective universities and private colleges, the public two-year college typically has student and environmental attributes associated with dropping out: students who are of relatively low ability and relatively unmotivated, high proportions of older students, and for Jewish students, high proportions of married students, no residential facilities, limited job opportunities and limited financial aid resources, and few opportunities for extracurricular activities. (Astin, 1975, p. 111)

The study goes on to consider student-institutional "fit" as it relates to parental income and tuition, selectivity and parental education, selectivity and student ability, size of home town and size of college, religion, and race. Results indicate that

persistence is increased if the student attends an institution with students of like social backgrounds such as town size, religion, and race; however, there was no evidence to support that attending selective institutions with peers who have similar ability increases persistence.

In an effort to better understand the role of involvement in student persistence, Astin (1977) embarked on a longitudinal study that utilized data on more than 200,000 students and examined 80 student outcome measures focused on the effects of involvement related to place of residence, honors programs, undergraduate research participation, social fraternities and sororities, academic involvement, student-faculty interaction, athletic involvement, and student government involvement (Astin, 1985).

Astin (1985), describing the results of Astin (1977), indicates that student involvement causes a greater amount of change for entering freshman than any other factor:

> Nearly all forms of student involvement, which refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience, are associated with greater-than-average change in entering student characteristics, and for certain outcomes, involvement is more strongly associated with change than either entering freshman characteristics or institutional characteristics. (pp. 36-37)

As a sequel to the 1977 study, Astin (1993) used a randomly selected national sample, which included 27,847 freshmen from 309 four-year institutions, to determine

the impact of college attendance on students' personal, social, and vocational development. Multiple regression techniques were used to obtain a predicted or expected score on each outcome measure, and were then analyzed to determine whether environmental variables had an impact on the predicted outcome. The study utilized 192 environmental measures (16 institutional characteristics, 35 measures of the student's peer group characteristics, 34 measures of faculty characteristics, 15 measures of financial aid, 16 measures of freshman major choice, 4 measures of place of residence, and 57 different measures of student involvement).

Given the large number of environmental variables, Astin (1993) reported significant general findings that are provided below. The findings presented here focus on the environmental variables, which had a direct impact on students' growth and development during the undergraduate years:

1. Political Identification
2. Personality and Self-Concept
    - Scholarship
    - Social activism
    - Hedonism
    - Status striving
    - Artistic inclination
    - Leadership
    - Writing ability
    - Drive to achieve
    - Physical health
    - Emotional health
    - Psychological well-being
    - Feeling overwhelmed

3. Attitudes and Beliefs
    - Liberalism
    - Libertarianism
    - Feminism
    - Belief that primary value of college is to increase earnings
    - Belief that individuals cannot change society
    - Commitment to environmental involvement
    - Developing a philosophy of life
    - Promoting racial understanding
    - Raising a family
    - Contributing to scientific theory
    - Being very well off financially

4. Patterns of Behavior
    - Alcohol consumption
    - Tutoring other students
    - Smoking cigarettes
    - Attending recitals or concerts
    - Being elected to a student office
    - Participating in campus protests
    - Getting married
    - Joining a social fraternity or sorority
    - Voting

5. Academic and Cognitive Behavior
    - Grade point average
    - Graduating w/honors
    - Completing the bachelor's degree
    - Admission to graduate or professional school
    - Performance on standardized tests (GRE, MCAT, LSAT, NTE)
    - General knowledge
    - Knowledge of a particular field or discipline
    - Ability to think critically
    - Analytical and problem-solving skills
    - Writing skills
    - Overall academic development
    - Cultural awareness
    - Foreign language skills
    - Leadership abilities
    - Interpersonal skills

- Preparation for graduate or professional school
- Job-related skills

6. Career Development
    - Business
    - College teaching
    - Engineering
    - Law
    - Medicine
    - Scientific research
    - School teaching
    - Degree aspirations

7. Satisfaction with College Environment
    - Student satisfaction
    - Willingness to re-enroll in same college
    - Relationships with faculty
    - Student life
    - Individual support services
    - Facilities
    - General education requirements
    - Opportunities to take interdisciplinary courses
    - Perceptions of the environment
    - Student-oriented faculty
    - Social change orientation
    - Trust in the administration
    - Resources and reputation emphasis

In addition to environmental factors that affect student growth and involvement, Astin (1993) found that:

> Learning, academic performance, and retention are positively associated with academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups…a wide spectrum of cognitive and affective outcomes is negatively affected by forms of involvement that either isolate the student from peers or remove the student physically from the campus: living at home, commuting,

being employed off campus, being employed full-time, and watching television. (p. 395)

Astin (1975, 1977, 1993) identified a number of institutional and student characteristics as well as environmental factors that have helped better define the underpinnings of persistence.

Pascarella (1980) conceptual model for research on student-faculty informal contact. Pascarella (1980) expanding on Tinto (1975) describes the relationship between informal/non-classroom student-faculty contact and persistence/withdrawal. According to Pascarella (1980), student background characteristics, college experiences, and institutional factors play important roles in the persistence/withdrawal process.

The model suggests that students bring a variety of differences based on their individual backgrounds and those with dispositions and characteristics that match the institutional environment tend to enroll in the institution. Individual differences influence students' experiences in peer culture, the classroom, and in extracurricular activities. Collective differences of the entire student body influence the institutional environment. The experiences that students have are influenced by their individual characteristics as well as the dynamics that are created by the student body as a whole. According to Pascarella (1980), "In turn, these experiences during college are likely to influence the extent and quality of students' informal contact with faculty as well as

various outcome measures" (p. 570). As shown in the model, educational outcomes directly affect the student's decision to persist or withdraw.

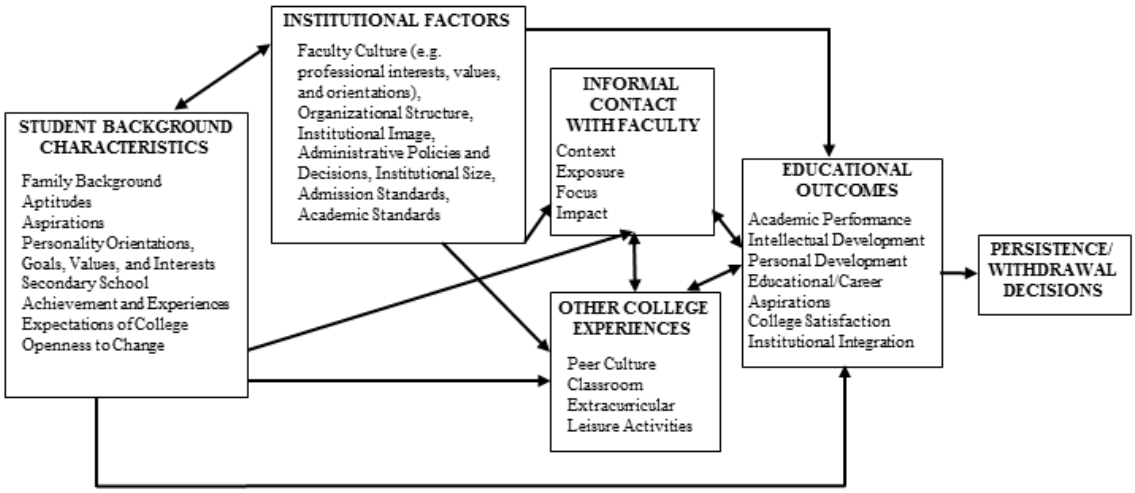

Figure 5. Conceptual Model for Student-Faculty Informal Contact (Pascarella, 1980)

In addition to the influence of students' background characteristics and their college experiences, the institution has a significant impact on informal student-faculty contact. Faculty culture, institution size, organizational substructure, administrative decisions and policies related to curriculum, faculty reward structures, faculty advising, counseling programs, and student orientation contribute to a faculty member's willingness and interest in interacting with students outside of the classroom.

According to Pascarella (1980):

> The evidence suggests that what transpires between students and faculty outside of the class may have a measurable, and possibly unique, positive impact on various facets of individual development during college. Clearly, such evidence

> underscores the potential importance of individual faculty members as informal agents of socialization during the student's college experience. (p. 571)

Pascarella (1980) underscores the influence of faculty-student relationships that extend beyond the classroom and the importance of providing opportunities for students to connect to the institution.

Bean & Metzner (1985) a conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. With increased enrollment of nontraditional students in the early 1980s, Bean & Metzner (1985) focused specifically on the attrition of nontraditional, university students. These students were defined as having the following characteristics that distinguished them from traditional students: (1) a student must not live in a residence hall and must commute to campus; (2) the student must be older than 24, which is the top of the age range for traditional students (18-24); and (3) the student must attend part-time.

In contrast to other foundational attrition models, which identified social integration as having a significant role in the attrition process, Bean & Metzner (1985) contended that, by virtue of the characteristics that define nontraditional students (commuter, part-time, older), social integration was not a high priority for that group and; therefore, not a significant factor in attrition. Bean & Metzner (1985) also believed that the external environment played a much larger role in attrition than did the collegiate environment.

The model is based on the expectation that dropout decisions will be based primarily on four sets of variables: (1) academic performance/GPA; (2) intent to leave—influenced by psychological outcomes/academic variables; (3) background and defining variables (high school performance/educational goals); and (4) environmental variables (finances, employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and opportunity to transfer).

Bean & Metzner (1985) also included two compensatory interaction effects: environmental variables and academic variables. Environmental variables are expected to be more important for nontraditional students than academic variables; therefore, when environmental support is good and academic support is not, students will persist. However, when environmental support is poor and academic support is good, students are more likely to drop out. "Thus, for nontraditional students, environmental support compensates for weak academic support, but academic support will not compensate for weak environmental support" (p. 492). Like Bean & Metzner (1985), Astin (1975) and Pascarella et al., (1983) found that, in university settings, a variety of environmental factors as well as living off campus negatively impacts persistence.

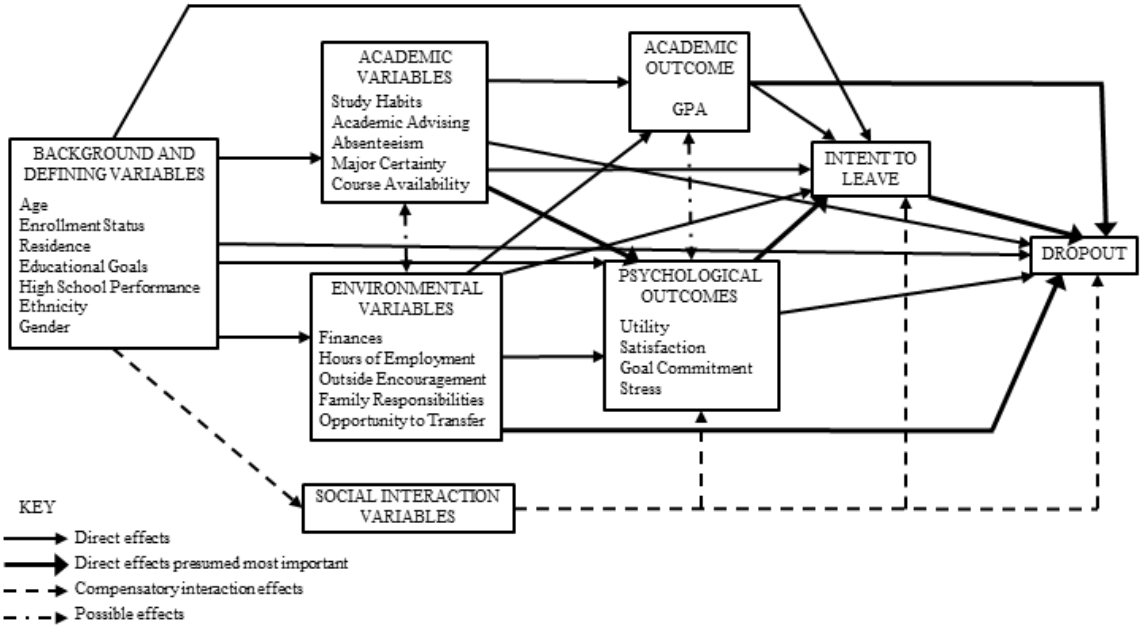

Figure 6. A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985)

Student attrition models developed by Spady, Tinto, Astin, Pascarella, and Bean and Metzner, which serve as the foundation for higher education retention research, provide a context to better understand and appreciate the myriad of factors and variables which influence persistence and drop-out decisions in higher education settings.

Although the historical significance of these models relies heavily on the experiences of traditional students attending four-year, residential colleges and universities, and does not specifically take into account the recent experiences of community college students, the overarching themes offer tremendous insight regarding student persistence and withdrawal.

Institutional Retention Models

The following models are not considered to be "foundational" retention models; however, they are included because they provide an institutional perspective of retention, include variables that were identified in the historical models, and are applicable to the community college setting.

Model of institutional action (Tinto 2005; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Nearly 20 years after Tinto revised the Model of Student Departure (1993), he developed a model that centers around creating institutional culture that supports student success. Tinto (2005) suggests that institutions interested in promoting student success should focus on the aspects of the environment they have control over and can change. According to Tinto (2005), there are at least five conditions that encourage student success: institutional commitment, expectations, support, feedback, and involvement or engagement.

- Commitment: Institutions committed to student success invest the resources necessary to provide rewards and incentives that encourage student success for all students, but especially for those who are low-income and underrepresented in the student body.

- Expectations: High expectations, especially for first-year students, set the standard of learning. Expectations can be expressed through formal and informal advising. Advising is important for all students, but it is critical for those who have not declared a major or have changed their major.

- Support (academic, social, and financial): Academic support networks, developmental education, supplemental instruction, tutoring, counseling, mentoring, diversity services, and financial aid are integral to student success.

- Feedback: Assessing student learning early provides students and faculty with opportunities to make adjustments that increase comprehension and learning.

- Involvement: Academic and social integration of students promotes student success especially during the first year of study. Involvement in the first year builds a foundation for subsequent affiliation and engagement.

  Involvement in the classroom is critical for student success. Learning is the goal of the college experience, and involved learning with others leads to greater effort and promotes intellectual development. Given that many students work and commute to college, the classroom may be the only place where they actively engage others.

Tinto (2005) emphasizes that student success results when institutions make a commitment to create supportive environments that value students. In the model, students possess a number of constant attributes (attitudes, goals, skills), engage in a variety of activities and responsibilities outside of the institution's purview (family, work, etc.), and enter an institution that also has a number of constant attributes (size, location, resources).

Both students and institutions have non-negotiable attributes; however, institutional commitment, which is expressed in the form of academic/social/financial support, feedback provided to and about students, and activities that shape student academic and social engagement, is established and promoted by the institution. Through policy, practice, programs, and faculty and staff development, institutions consciously create the learning and social environment that enhances student success.

Tinto (2005) acknowledges that this model identifies some of the major elements necessary for a full model of institutional action; however, he expects it to prompt future

work that will "fill in the gaps and move toward the development and testing of a useful model and, in turn, a theory of institutional action for student success" (p. 320).

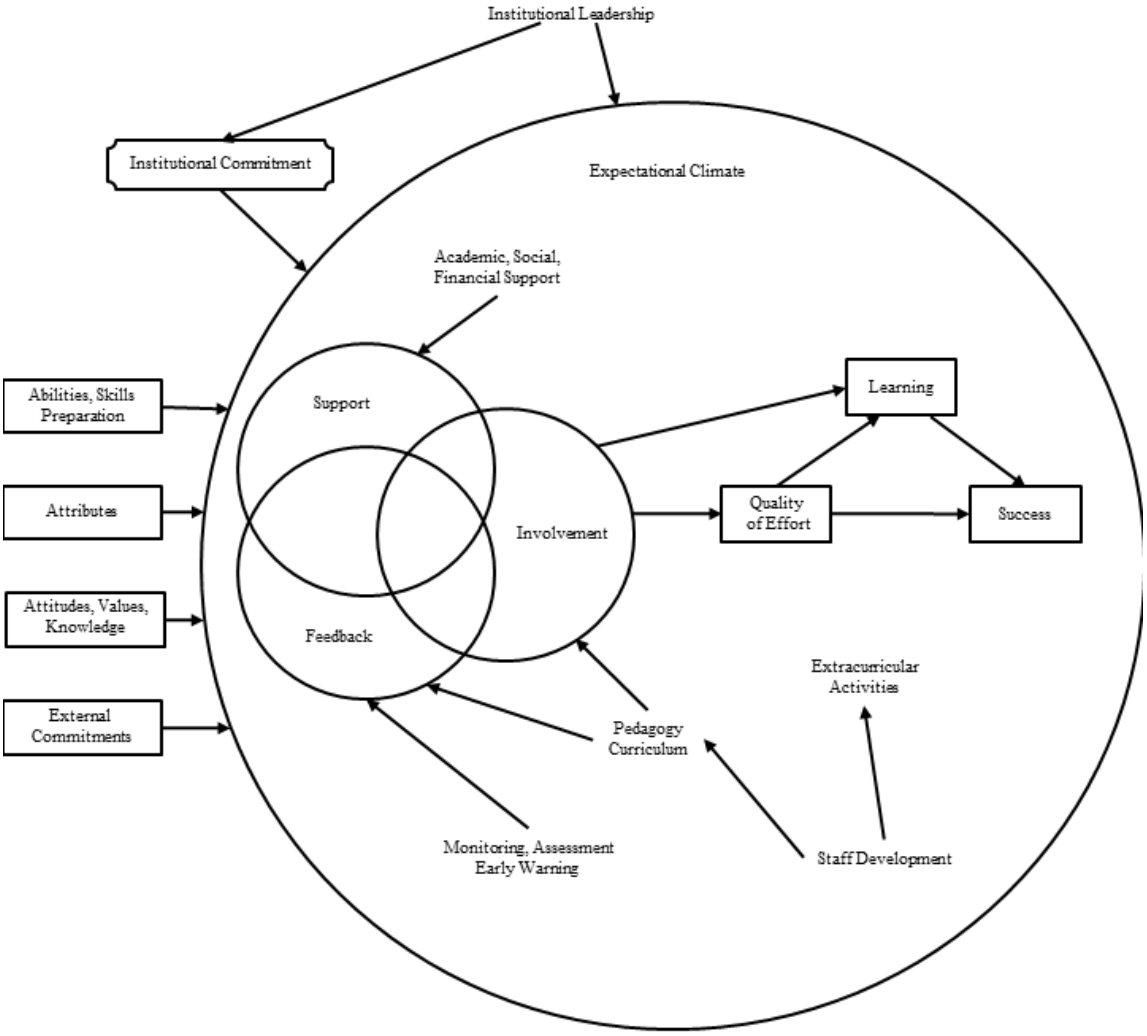

Figure 7. Elements of a Preliminary Model of Institutional Action (Tinto, 2005, Tinto & Pusser, 2006)

Seidman retention formula (2005). $*RET = E_{ID} + (E + IN + C)_{IV}$

Seidman (2005), who utilizes Tinto (1987, 1993) as a basis, defines retention as "student attainment of academic and/or personal goal(s)" (p. 296). Graduation may or may not be a factor, and it is important that the college understand the student's intent and how the intent may change over time.

Seidman (2005) argues that early identification, early intervention, intensive intervention, and continuous intervention will lead to student retention. At the earliest possible time, which may be during the application process, a thorough assessment of a student's academic and social risk of being unsuccessful in college should be made. Once a concern has been identified, it is important to begin intervention services and programs as soon as possible. According to Seidman (2005), "Interventions can begin while the student is still enrolled in high school or during summer months prior to the beginning of the first term" (p. 298).

Intensive intervention must be strong enough to induce the desired result, and continuous intervention remains constant until the desired effect has been realized. As a matter of practice, intervention services should be designed, monitored, and assessed to ensure they are positively contributing to the students' needs. Seidman (2005) asserts that, "a relationship with the student becomes a lifelong commitment between the student and the college, and the college and the student" (p. 299).

According to Seidman (2005), based on the amount of resources expended to increase retention, it continues to be an important issue on college campuses across the country: "It is time to move forward in the quest to help students meet their academic and personal goals" (p. 314).

Bean (2005): Nine themes of college student retention.

Prematriculation behavior and attitudes → student interaction with the institution and external environment after enrollment → attitudes about school experiences → intention to leave → departure from college

According to Bean (2005), student departure is based on intention to leave, and intention to leave is based on pre-entry attitudes and behavior coupled with the student's interaction with the institution and external environment. Bean (2005) argues there are nine themes associated with student retention, and institutions would be well-served to focus resources, time, and effort on better understanding how each of these affects a student's ability to connect to the institution:

1. Intentions:
    - The less time between ascertaining the student's intention and the behavior, the more accurate the prediction

2. Institutional Fit and Institutional Commitment (Loyalty):
    - Attitudes about attachment to the institution and attitudes about being a student

3. Psychological Processes and Key Attitudes:
    - Self-efficacy, approach/avoidance, and locus of control
    - Sense of satisfaction of being a student, sense of self-development, self-confidence, utility, and quality of education

4. Academics:
    - Course/classroom interaction with faculty
    - Academic advising

5. Social Factors:
    - Parental support
    - College friendships
    - Social activities

6. Bureaucratic Factors:
    - Admissions
    - Application process
    - Financial aid process
    - Bursar's office
    - Housing
    - Advising

7. The External Environment:
    - Work and family responsibilities
    - Significant others

8. The Student's Background:
    - Social capital (networks and connections, personal abilities, capabilities, and skills)

9. Money and Finance:
    - Lack of family support
    - Lack of funds

According to Bean (2005):

> The ability to affect retention rates comes from changes in institutional personnel or the way they do their jobs, changes in the composition of the student body, and changes in the way these two groups interact. Policies and programs can be important for retaining particular students, but major changes in the overall rates of retention usually involve major changes in the institution's social, academic, and economic condition. An institution needs to change what it is or what it does in order for retention rates to change. (pp. 236-237)

As institutions commit to the Completion Agenda and focus more intently on student success, it is important to consider institutional retention models such as those developed by Tinto (2005), Bean (2005) and Seidman (2005). These models offer perspectives that are integral to developing effective institution-wide programs and services that lead to engagement, persistence, and retention.

Early Connections and Institutional Engagement

Kuh (2009) defines engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) argue that "what students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college" (p. 8). The amount of time and effort that students expend on educationally purposeful activities and the allocation of institutional resources that foster student success are two key factors in student engagement (Kuh et al., 2005). According to Hu and Kuh (2002), "Student engagement is a function of the interaction of student and institutional characteristics" (p. 571).

Kuh et al., (2005), using two separate regression models to examine student engagement and graduation rates for 700 colleges and universities, found that institutional environment plays a critical role in both engagement and student success. Of the 700 colleges and universities, 20 diverse (9 public and 11 private), baccalaureate-granting institutions were selected for further study. Based on institution size, location,

selectivity, and student characteristics, these institutions scored higher than predicted on 6-year graduation rates and on five areas of documented effective educational practices (DEEP) identified by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The five cluster areas used for the study were (1) level of academic challenge, (2) active and collaborative learning, (3) student interaction with faculty members, (4) enriching educational experiences, and (5) supportive environment. The study revealed that the 20 DEEP institutions, which scored higher than expected on engagement and student success, had six commonalities:

1. A "living" mission and "lived" educational philosophy
    - Clearly articulated educational purposes and aspirations
    - Coherent, relatively well understood philosophy that guides "how we do things here"

2. An unshakeable focus on student learning
    - Valuing undergraduate student learning
    - Experimenting with engaging pedagogies
    - Demonstrating a cool passion for talent development, innovation, and institutional change
    - Understanding that every student can learn under the right conditions

3. Environments adapted for educational enrichment
    - Creating a sense of uniqueness
    - Developing a sense of place; linkages with the community; inviting physical spaces for teaching and learning and for gathering places
    - Psychological environment: feelings of well-being, belonging, identity, availability of personal space, absence of anonymity, presence of diversity, and communication networks

4. Clearly marked pathways to success
    - Acculturation and alignment (teaching students how to use institutional resources and making them available when the students need them)

- Prospective students are provided clear messages about the mission, values, and expectations; newcomers participate in structured experiences and are not left alone to figure out how to be successful--first-year student programs, advising, academic support, connecting students to each other, valuing diversity

5. An improvement-oriented ethos
    - Subscribing to a learning organization philosophy focused on improvement; internally motivated to "do better"

6. Shared responsibility for educational quality and student success
    - Enjoying mutual respect and affinity for institution's mission and culture
    - Employing effective leadership
    - Promoting faculty and staff diversity
    - All departments sharing responsibility for student success
    - Focusing on student responsibility and peer learning

All six themes lend to creating an institutional environment that new students are able to connect with and thrive in. Engaging students early is an important step toward persistence and completion. Gibson and Slate (2010) argue that "assisting all first-year students in their persistence toward degree completion is essential and imperative...student attrition is associated with low levels of engagement, low levels of satisfaction with college experiences, and minimal amounts of participation in educationally purposeful activities" (p. 373).

According to Bean (2005), "Most students drop out between the end of the freshman year and the beginning of the sophomore year" (p. 218). Helping students succeed through the first 12-15 credit hours significantly improves long-term success in course, certificate, and degree completion (CCCSE, 2010a; Driscoll, 2007). While academic engagement gets to the very heart of student learning and contributes to

student success, before students reach the classroom, they must navigate the myriad of procedures and processes that are required to gain admission to the institution (Karp, 2011). For those who are new to the collegiate environment, traversing enrollment, financial aid, and registration processes can become arduous tasks filled with uncertainty, anxiety, and trepidation. Seemingly routine tasks can leave new students, who are unfamiliar with the college environment, completely overwhelmed.

Levitz, et al., (1999) argues that "far too little attention is usually paid to how students are coping; whether they are getting connected to the new environment or feeling lost, confused, or overwhelmed" (p. 42), and Tinto (1987) suggests that students' initial contact with the institution may be directly linked to persistence:

> The beginning of the sequence of events leading to student departure can be traced to the student's first formal contact with the institution. It is during the process of seeking out and applying for admission to a particular institution that individuals make initial contact with and form their first impression of the social and intellectual character of the institution. (p. 141)

Berger and Milem (1999) found that early peer involvement strengthens institutional perceptions and positively influences persistence. Students who do not get involved early in the fall semester are more likely to stay uninvolved for the entire year, and "they are less likely to perceive the institution or their peers as supportive, less likely to become integrated, and as a result, less likely to persist" (p. 658). Schuetz (2008) concluded that a strong sense of belonging, competency, and autonomy had a

greater impact on community college students' levels of engagement than did the "right" academic preparation. According to Rendon (1994), student-friendly institutional environments that are nurturing and supportive lend to engagement:

> Students are more likely to persist if institutions help them to be successful and negotiate the transition to college…nontraditional students will not become involved on their own…simply offering opportunities for involvement is not enough, the key to involving students is to create validating academic and social communities in and out of class…out-of-class validating environments require a hospitable campus climate, and an institutional climate that connects the cognitive and social dimensions of the college. (p. 1)

Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) argue that community colleges unknowingly create barriers for the very students they are trying to serve, and these obstacles negatively impact student success. Case studies of seven community colleges and seven private occupational colleges revealed that community college students with less "social know-how" often struggle with (1) bureaucratic hurdles, (2) confusing choices, (3) student-initiated guidance, (4) limited counselor availability, (5) poor advice from staff, (6) slow detection of costly mistakes, and (7) poor handling of conflicting demands. Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) believe that students' social know-how is critical to student success, and many nontraditional and disadvantaged students are lacking access to important information and are unable to effectively utilize the services that create institutional connections and enhance student engagement:

> We find that disadvantaged students with limited time and finances to devote to education are often confused about their choices. They do not know how to get the information they need, and small amounts of confusion can evolve into large problems of wasted time and poor decisions. Students often come from public schools where counseling services are limited, and they lack the know-how they need to make the required choices. We find that many students are first-generation students whose parents have not attended college…In addition, students face other hurdles: filling out enrollment forms, registering for classes, applying for financial aid, making choices that efficiently accumulate credits toward a degree, and fitting in work and family obligations. (p. 125)

The study goes on to suggest that community colleges may be well served to embrace an operational model used by private two-year occupational institutions. These institutions minimize bureaucratic hurdles by streamlining students' initial experiences with the college as well as providing on-going, coordinated support.

In this model, students are assigned a single advisor who assists with all issues related to enrollment and helps to facilitate the financial aid process. When students enroll, they work with an admissions counselor to discuss academic and career goals and determine which, if any, available programs are a good fit. Once students begin classes, guidance is built into the process. Advisors are responsible for monitoring student progress and they work with faculty to ensure that students are meeting program expectations. On-going communication between the advisor and faculty member

provides students with much-needed support and ensures that students receive the intervention they need.

To ensure that students stay engaged, they are required to meet with advisors each term, and in an effort to reduce the possibility of students taking unnecessary or unrelated courses that will not count toward their chosen degree, occupational colleges limit course options each semester. In a survey of 4,300 students, 45% of community college students responded that they had taken a course, which they later discovered would not count toward their degree, while only 16% of private occupational college students reported the same experience (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003).

Occupational colleges devote significant staffing resources to counseling and job placement, while community college counselors experience daunting workloads. In the study, at least one occupational college had a counseling ratio of 260 students to each counselor, and the job placement function was entirely separate. Counselors in community colleges performed personal, academic, and job placement counseling and had a typical ratio of 800 students to one counselor.

Advisors in occupational colleges are sensitive to working students, and to accommodate students' employment needs, these colleges create course schedules that accommodate work hours. Oftentimes, occupational colleges offer year-round programs that include abbreviated course lengths and a variety of starting times. Creating optional starting times and shortening the amount of time that students must devote to program completion helps students better manage external responsibilities that might otherwise

cause them to leave the program. If students must stop out for one course, they can resume their coursework in a relatively short period of time.

It is worth noting that occupational colleges do not have expansive missions nor do they offer the depth and breadth of courses, programs, and educational opportunities that community colleges have become widely known for; however, the occupational college model does emphasize the importance of being student-centered and creating meaningful institutional connections that lead to greater student engagement.

Completing registration, seeking advising, and applying for financial aid are integral access points that provide students with important early institutional connection opportunities. Research indicates that advising (Kuh, et al., 2005; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Tinto, 2005) and financial aid (Astin, 1977; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Fike & Fike, 2008; Hu & St. John, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter, & Weber, 2004; Zhai & Monzon, 2001) are linked to increased persistence; however, when institutional barriers make it difficult for students to seek out these critical support mechanisms, engagement is threatened.

Part-time students are especially vulnerable to institutional barriers. These students are twice as likely to be undecided in terms of major (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007), spend less time on campus than full-time students, and have minimal opportunities to connect. Limited access to important information coupled with negative experiences may be the reason a student either chooses not to complete the enrollment process or eventually drops out.

Tinto (1987) notes that, generally, new students are left to their own devices to find a way to fit into their new environment:

> In most situations, new students are left to make their own way through the maze of institutional life. They, like many generations of students before them, have to learn the ropes of college life largely on their own. For them, daily personal contacts with other members of the college, in both the formal and informal domains of institutional life, are the only vehicles by which incorporation occurs. (p. 98-99)

Levitz, et al., (1999) believes that getting students from admission to graduation requires an institutional commitment from day one:

> Getting students started right on the path through the institution to graduation begins with anticipating and meeting their transition and adjustment needs when they enter…intrusive proactive strategies must be used to reach freshmen before the students have an opportunity to experience failure, disappointment, and confusion. (p. 39)

The research is clear about the importance of engaging students in the early phase of their transition to higher education, and the literature review revealed a number of important themes associated with retention: social and academic integration, student intent, environmental factors, student characteristics, student growth and development, engagement, and institutional commitment.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Chapter two provided a brief educational and economic context and relevant research related to engagement, persistence, and retention. Chapter three will outline the design of the study, which focused on qualitatively describing first-year, persisting, full-time and part-time students' perceptions regarding early campus connections and the role those connections play in persistence.

Student satisfaction, which is characterized by the extent that students feel a sense of connection and loyalty to the campus, is correlated to engagement, and "student engagement is related to a host of positive outcomes, including persistence, grades, and satisfaction" (Rion, 2008, p. 66). To this end, early connections are an essential first step in engaging and retaining students.

Chapter three begins with a recap of the purpose of the study and the research questions, and includes a description of the research design, sample description and selection, data collection procedures, and the data analysis process.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to qualitatively describe first-year, persisting, full-time and part-time students' perceptions about the role that early connections, as defined by the Survey of Entering Student Engagement, play in their decisions to persist.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of first-year, persisting full- and part-time students about the role of early campus connections in their decision to persist?

    a. What are first-year, persisting, full-time students' perceptions of early campus connections?

    b. What are first-year, persisting, part-time students' perceptions of early campus connections?

    c. What are the notable differences in the perceptions reported by first-year, persisting, full- and part-time students regarding early campus connections?

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) define qualitative research as "an umbrella term to refer to several research strategies that share certain characteristics. The data collected have been termed soft, that is, rich in description of people, places, and conversations and not easily handled by statistical procedures" (p. 2). Merriam (1988) notes that, "qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities—that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception" (p. 17). Predicated on the assumption that reality is socially constructed and not discovered, qualitative research seeks to understand how people experience the world around them (Glesne, 2006; Willis, 2007). This study focused on student perspectives of early campus experiences from their frame of reference; therefore, the research design employed was qualitative in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Qualitative research provides a mechanism for capturing rich data that takes context and perspective into account. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), there are five characteristics of qualitative research, and the researcher has included a brief explanation of how they manifested in this particular study.

1. "Qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument…qualitative researchers go to the particular setting under study because they are concerned with the context" (p. 27). Understanding the campus environment where students experience early connections provided a context to better understand their perspectives and enhanced the researcher's ability to understand how and why those perspectives came to be.
2. "Qualitative research is descriptive" (p. 28). Researchers approach the study as if everything is important and has a potential impact on the phenomenon or the way it is perceived (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Taking nothing for granted with regard to context and allowing the data to paint a picture of the students' experiences provided the researcher with an opportunity to report from a more comprehensive perspective.
3. "Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products" (p. 28). Understanding the process of how and why student perceptions of early campus experiences came to be provided the researcher with a frame of reference for the data gathered.

4. “Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively” (p. 29). The researcher is not trying to prove or disprove a theory or confirm or dispel preconceived notions. Gathering data on student perceptions of early campus connections allowed the researcher to be open to the possibilities as information was gathered.
5. “Meaning is of essential concern to the qualitative approach” (p. 29). Qualitative researchers are interested in how people make sense of their lives and are concerned with participant perspectives. Using qualitative research to uncover student perceptions of early campus experiences enabled the researcher to understand how and why students’ perceptions developed and the meanings that were attached to those perceptions.

Given the characteristics of qualitative research, it was the most appropriate method for this study; however, the method does have limitations. Some limitations include generalizability, researcher bias, and reliability (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

Limitations of Methodology

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), qualitative research may not be generalizable or applicable beyond the specific research participants and setting and that may or may not be a concern. In this study, generalizability was not of particular concern because the study was not designed to provide a universal truth regarding perceptions for all students or all community colleges, but rather, it was designed to provide insight within a specific context. The data may not be generalizable to all

community colleges, but it may be insightful for the host community college and other community colleges.

Researcher bias, which may come in the form of interpretation, is a concern for qualitative researchers. The researcher's goal is to expand knowledge and not to prejudice the data or pass judgment on the setting (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The researcher for this study has over 13 years of experience working with community college students, but had no direct experience with the SENSE instrument or students' early campus experiences in the community college site. Therefore, the researcher had no particular personal or professional investment in the survey instrument, institution, or findings. The researcher was only interested in conducting the study and reporting the findings.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) also discuss the concern of researcher presence on subject behavior. Although there is always the possibility that subjects will give positive feedback because they believe the researcher is expecting to hear positive comments, the researcher did not know the students or have any direct or indirect influence over the students or the setting. The researcher's only role in the process was to record and confirm the accuracy of the data collected.

In addition to generalizability and researcher bias, reliability is a concern in qualitative research. Because interpretation is woven throughout the qualitative research process, there are concerns about the ability to replicate the findings. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), qualitative researchers are less interested in replication and

more interested in the "accuracy and comprehensiveness" and view reliability as the "fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study" (p. 44). The researcher understood the concerns regarding the methodology and was committed to embracing the study with the utmost professionalism and neutrality. The researcher was not aware of any particular personal or professional bias related to the topic; however, should bias have been realized at any point in the study, the researcher was prepared to acknowledge it openly and honestly.

Case Study Design

In an effort to investigate the perceptions of first-year, persisting students in a particular community college, the researcher utilized a single case study approach. According to Merriam (1988), a case study is "an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group" (p. 9), and Willis (2007) asserts that "the focus is on understanding the intricacies of a particular situation, setting, organization, culture, or individual, but that local understanding may be related to prevailing theories or models" (p. 243).

Utilizing a single case study approach enabled the researcher to contextualize the findings. As noted by Merriam (1988), "By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity ('the case'), this approach aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon. The case study seeks holistic description and explanation" (p. 10). Focusing research on one community college enabled the researcher to better understand how the context may have influenced persisting student

perceptions in the site selected. The site was selected on the basis of what Maxwell (2005) terms purposeful selection:

> This is a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices…selecting those times, settings, and individuals that can provide you with the information that you need in order to answer your research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative selection decisions. (p. 88)

Selection of Site and Participants

For the purpose of this study, two levels of selection were used. First, the proposed site, which may also be referred to as the host community college, was confirmed and then participants were selected. The site was selected based on the following criteria: benchmark data collected from the SENSE indicate that scores for early connections were below the national average and institutional enrollment characteristics were fairly typical of national community college enrollment.

Description of Sample

The site's benchmark score for early connections was available on the SENSE website, and the overall score was 48.8, which was below the national average of 50. The early connections score for full-time students was slightly above the national average at 50.6; however, the early connections score for part-time students was below

the national average and nearly three percentage points below those of full-time students at 47.9.

According to institutional data, the site is a public-serving, open-admission community college that enrolls 21,033 students annually. In fall, 2011, 66.6% of students attended part-time, and 33.4% attended full-time. Females comprised 55% of enrollment and males 45%. The average age of students was 25.6. Seventy and one-half percent of students were Caucasian; 6.5% were African American; 7% were Hispanic; .7% were American Indian/Alaskan Native; 4.9% were Asian/Pacific Islander; 2% were two or more races; and 8.4% did not report their ethnicity.

In an effort to gather the most useful data, the researcher used purposeful sampling. According to Merriam (1988), purposeful sampling is based on the belief that the researcher wants to understand the phenomenon and learn the most. In seeking to capture perspectives that represent the student body, participants were first-year, full-time and part-time students who were enrolled in their second consecutive semester and mirrored the student population in enrollment status, age, gender, and ethnicity.

Two separate focus groups of seven to nine part-time and full-time students and ten interviews were originally planned; however, there was difficulty scheduling students for focus groups; therefore, data from only one focus group of full-time, first-year, persisting students and 22 semi-structured interviews with full- and part-time persisting students was used in the study.

Due to concerns about the enrollment status of one student in the focus group, ultimately, data was only used from two of the individuals in the focus group; therefore, an additional interview was conducted. Data was collected from two focus group members, and 22 semi-structured, individual interviews for a total of 24 participants (12 part-time and 12 full-time).

During the full-time student focus group, the interviewer realized that one student was an international student who was attending the college in what may be considered "special" circumstances. As part of the student exchange program, the student did not choose this particular community college and was provided support prior to enrolling and on-going academic and social support to make her transition more manageable. The student was a first-year, second semester, persisting student; however, given her unique circumstances, the student did not fit the profile of a typical community college student. To protect the integrity of the data and ensure that the responses did not inappropriately skew the study, the researcher chose not to include the student's responses.

With the absence of dialogue in various portions of the focus group and the fact there was no focus group for part-time students, the researcher determined that it would be appropriate to present focus group responses in the same format as the individual student interviews. As a matter of reference, full-time students #9 and #12 were participants in the focus group.

Data Collection Instruments

Merriam (1988) contends that "data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment…and data conveyed through words have been labeled 'qualitative,' whereas data presented in number form are 'quantitative'" (p. 67). Bogdan and Biklen (1982) define data as "rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying; they are the particulars that form the basis of analysis" (p. 73). In qualitative research, there are a number of common data collection methods. Data may be derived from interview transcripts, field notes, and documents (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Merriam, 1988). To ensure consistency in findings, the researcher utilized a focus group, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

As noted by Yin (2003), "One of the most important sources of case study information is the interview" (p. 89). Merriam asserts, "The most common form of interview is the person-to-person encounter in which one person elicits information from another" (p. 71). Interviews are designed to obtain information that cannot be observed such as feelings, attitudes, previous behaviors, intentions, and thoughts (Merriam, 1988). Glesne (2006) indicates that semi-structured interviews are appropriate for qualitative research. "Generally, qualitative researchers begin with some interview questions and remain open to reforming and adding to them throughout the research process" (p. 102). Interviews were semi-structured so that the researcher approached each interview with the same questions; yet the process remained flexible in order for the researcher to ask additional questions as the process warranted. It was important that the process be

organic enough to allow participants to express thoughts, ideas, and concerns that may have been relevant but not directly connected to the questions that were asked.

In addition to individual interviews, as noted, the researcher planned to conduct two separate focus groups of seven to nine full- and part-time students. Seven students were confirmed to attend the focus group; however, only three attended. Given the lack of attendance for the focus group, the researcher determined the most appropriate way to gather the data was to hold semi-structured individual interviews at times that were most convenient for students.

The researcher developed interview questions that were designed to uncover perceptions that first-year, persisting, full- and part-time students had about early campus connections and the role those connections play in persistence. A copy of the focus group and interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

In addition to the focus group and semi-structured interviews, documents were used as a data source. Reviewing documents provided the researcher with insight regarding campus policies, practices, and philosophy. According to Glesne (2006), "Artifacts are the material objects that, for your work, represent the culture of the people and setting you are studying" (p. 88), and Merriam (1988) indicates that "in qualitative studies, a form of content analysis is used to analyze documents...the aim is to be systematic and analytic, but not rigid" (p. 117). To gain a better understanding of the campus environment and look for institutional references to campus connections and student success, a document analysis included a review of the institution's website,

mission statement, vision statement, strategic plan, institutional effectiveness plan, and enrollment, retention, and graduation data.

Data Collection Process

Prior to gathering data and conducting the qualitative study, the researcher sought approval from the University of Texas at Austin's Institutional Review Board and the site's Institutional Review Board. The researcher worked with the host institution's student success division to secure on-campus space to conduct the interviews/focus group and with the office of institutional research to secure student contact information for participant recruitment purposes.

Initially, the institutional research office provided the researcher with contact information for 90 students who met the study criteria and mirrored the student enrollment population, and the researcher contacted students via email and followed up via mail. Only one student responded. The researcher requested an additional 90 student contacts, and the researcher contacted students via email and mail. Only two students responded.

The researcher requested an additional 90 student contacts, and only one student responded. The researcher requested an additional 90 students; however, the institutional research office only provided 40 contacts. The researcher talked with the institutional research department to get suggestions on how the email/mail message might be revised to attract more students. The institutional research office provided suggestions. The

researcher made the suggested revisions and contacted students via email and mail. In this attempt, there were no student responses.

By this point, the researcher had contacted 310 students, which yielded only four responses. Given the lack of student response, the researcher enlisted assistance from the assistant dean of student life and leadership, and the student services office. The assistant dean of student life and leadership felt that the students' lack of familiarity with the researcher was the most logical reason for the poor response. Understanding that those who work closely with students understand the best way to reach them, final decisions regarding recruitment strategies were made in concert with appropriate administrative staff.

The manager of student life/leadership posted a message to every student's college email access webpage to announce the study and sent emails to the officers of all student clubs and organizations. The coordinator and program director for learning engagement sent emails to campus contacts, and the coordinator for student work study sent an email to all student workers. In addition, the researcher posted announcements in the campus center and student lounge.

The vast majority of student responses came from the message posting on the student email access webpage. The student life office forwarded email and telephone responses, and the researcher followed up with interested students via telephone or email to confirm their eligibility and interest in participating.

The researcher was responsible for answering all study related questions and developing an interview schedule. Interview times were based solely on the students' availability, and interviews times ranged from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. To expedite data gathering, the focus group and individual interviews were held within a three week period.

To ensure that interview questions were easily understood, the researcher conducted a field test of the semi-structured interview process. According to Light, Singer, and Willett (1990):

> No design is ever so complete that it cannot be improved by a prior, small-scale exploratory study. Pilot studies are almost always worth the time and effort. Carry out a pilot study if any facet of your design needs clarification. (p. 213)

The researcher conducted two individual semi-structured interviews from the pool of students who agreed to participate. Upon analyzing data from the pilot test, which was not included in the study, the researcher determined that questions were easily understood and no revisions were necessary.

As an incentive to participate, the researcher offered each participant (including those in the pilot) their choice of one $10 gift card redeemable for purchases on campus or at McDonald's or Starbucks. The researcher scheduled interviews with students, emailed a demographic data form (Appendix B), an informed consent form (Appendix C), confirmed participation via email or telephone and inquired as to what kind of gift card the student would like.

Eligible students were asked to bring the completed forms to their assigned interview or focus group. Many students did not remember to bring the completed forms, and the researcher began having students complete the forms on site before participating. When students reached the interview location, they were presented with the gift card of their choice.

Reliability and Validity

As previously noted, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) indicate that qualitative researchers are less interested in replication and more interested in "accuracy and comprehensiveness" and view reliability as the "fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study" (p. 44). To ensure that all data were captured accurately, the focus group and interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the interviews/focus group, often times the researcher restated and summarized responses to confirm the participant's intent. Marshall and Rossman (2011) call this process "member checking" and believe that it provides the researcher with a way to ask participants if he "got it right" (p. 221). The researcher also explained the transcription process and provided students with her contact information should they want to revisit or clarify their responses.

In addition to member checking, the researcher also used peer debriefing to increase the validity of the study. According to Creswell (2009):

> This process involves locating a person (a peer debriefer) who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with

> people other than the researcher. This strategy – involving an interpretation beyond the researcher and invested in another person – adds validity to an account. (p. 192)

The researcher sought the input of two individuals who are familiar with qualitative research but not familiar with the specific focus of this study. Seeking input provided the researcher with an opportunity to consider various ways of mining and presenting the data.

To further ensure validity, the researcher used triangulation. "Triangulation is the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 252). Data from different sources can be used to corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research in question (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In an effort to triangulate the data, the researcher used SENSE data, the focus group, individual interviews, and document analysis of the institution's website, institutional effectiveness plan, strategic plan, mission statement, vision statement, and enrollment, retention, and graduation data. Reviewing institutional documents provided the impetus for including specific interview questions, which corresponded to strategies that the institution implemented to improve institutional connections. These strategies as well as the findings will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Data Analysis

> Bogdan and Biklen (1982) define data analysis as…the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and

> other materials that you accumulate to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others…data analysis involves working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others. (p. 145)

Merriam (1988) defines data analysis much more simply: "Data analysis is the process of making sense out of one's data" (p. 127). In an effort to systematically organize the data so that the researcher was able to interpret and utilize it, open coding was used. Open coding involved "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). For this study, data gathered from the focus group and interviews was hand coded and put into categories according to emergent themes. Developing categories involves understanding which data fit together, putting them into categories, and further analyzing them to look for emergent categories (Merriam, 1988). Lincoln and Guba (1981) discuss four criteria for developing categories: the frequency with which something occurs, the importance to the audience, the uniqueness of the occurrence, and new areas of inquiry that may be applicable to a commonly known issue.

In addition to categorizing the data according to emergent themes, the researcher developed notes from the document analysis. Using multiple sources of information enabled the researcher to conduct a more thorough analysis of the findings.

Summary

Chapter three outlined the design of the qualitative research study, which focused on qualitatively describing student perceptions regarding early campus experiences. Chapter four will report findings of the study, and Chapter five will provide an analysis of those findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

Chapter four will summarize the findings of the qualitative research study, which aimed to describe first-year, persisting full- and part-time students' perceptions about the role of early campus connections in their decision to persist. Institutional demographics, SENSE data, findings related to the perceptions of full- and part-time students and notable differences between full- and part-time students will be discussed. Findings will be summarized and presented separately for part-time and full-time study participants and a comparison of findings for both groups will follow.

The research was conducted in a public-serving, open admission community college with institutional enrollment characteristics that are fairly typical of national community college enrollment. In fall, 2011, nearly 30% of students were identified as minority, 66.5% percent of students attended part-time, and 33.5% attended full-time. Females comprised 55% of enrollment and males 45%. Twenty-two percent of students received some type of financial aid, 12.4% were first-generation, and the average age was 25.6.

In an effort to uncover student perceptions of early connections and the role these connections play in persistence, the researcher utilized document analysis, a focus group, and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The document analysis included a review of the institutional website, strategic plan, mission statement, vision statement, student handbook, and retention and graduation data.

The document analysis noted verbiage in the strategic plan, mission and vision statements, and in the institutional effectiveness plan which supported a consistent, student centered message and an institutional commitment to student success. The document analysis also revealed that institutional leadership committed resources to implement specific strategies to intentionally connect with students. Since 2009, the community college has been offering welcome week, organizing teams to make telephone calls to new students, and designating two spaces (student lounge and campus center) specifically for student interaction.

The welcome week event at the beginning of each semester provides an opportunity for hundreds of faculty and staff to assist students campus-wide. Wearing "Helping Students Learn" shirts and "Ask Me" buttons to help welcome and orient students as they arrive for the new semester, faculty and staff are visible throughout campus to answer questions, provide directions, and help students as needed. Student clubs and organizations set-up booths in the courtyard and refreshments are served.

Teams are organized to make "welcome" telephone calls to each new student before the start of the semester. Calls are designed to welcome students to the campus, answer questions, and provide information.

Two spaces have been designed specifically for student use and interaction. The student lounge is a recreational space that offers video games, television, and table games. The campus center offers a student-friendly meeting space for clubs, workshops, and skill development opportunities.

Institutional Data

An overview of institutional demographics, entering student data, first-to-second semester retention data, and participant data is included to provide a demographic context for the study. The 2011/2012 enrollment and retention data for students who were classified as nonresident aliens were not available. Therefore, nonresident alien students will not be included in the most recent enrollment/retention data presented. As a matter of reference, enrollment data reported to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011) indicate that nonresident aliens comprised 3% of the institution's enrollment in 2010.

Total Institutional Enrollment

According to the host institution's office of institutional research, fall, 2011 enrollment was 21,033. Over the last year, enrollment increased for each ethnic group except American Indian/Native Alaskans. Enrollment for that group remained stable at 1%. African American enrollment grew .5%; Asian/Pacific Islander enrollment grew 1.9%; Hispanic enrollment grew 1%; and Caucasian enrollment grew 4.5%. The bar graph that follows shows the percentage of fall, 2011 enrollment by ethnicity.

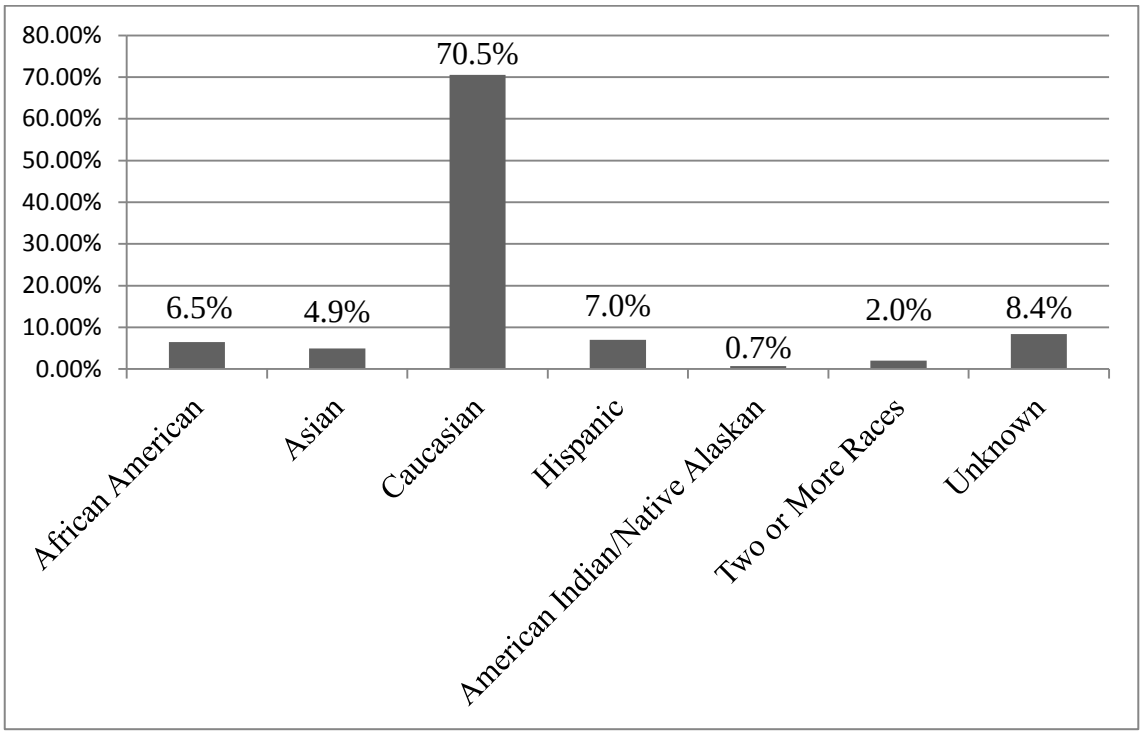

Figure 8. Fall 2011 Enrollment By Ethnicity

In fall, 2011, just over 59% of students planned to seek an associate degree, and 7.1% planned to obtain a technical certificate. Nearly 34% did not plan to seek a degree or certificate from the host institution.

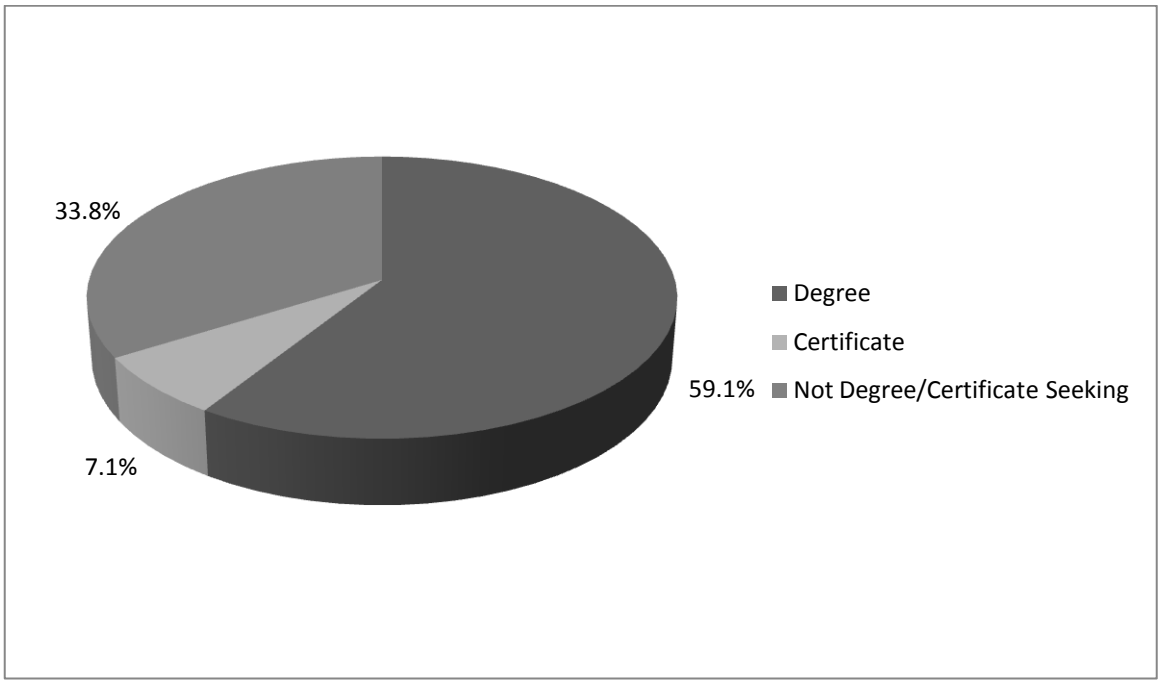

Figure 9. Fall, 2011 Degree Intent: Total College Students

Fall, 2011 full- and part-time minority enrollment mirrored full- and part-time Caucasian and total college enrollment:

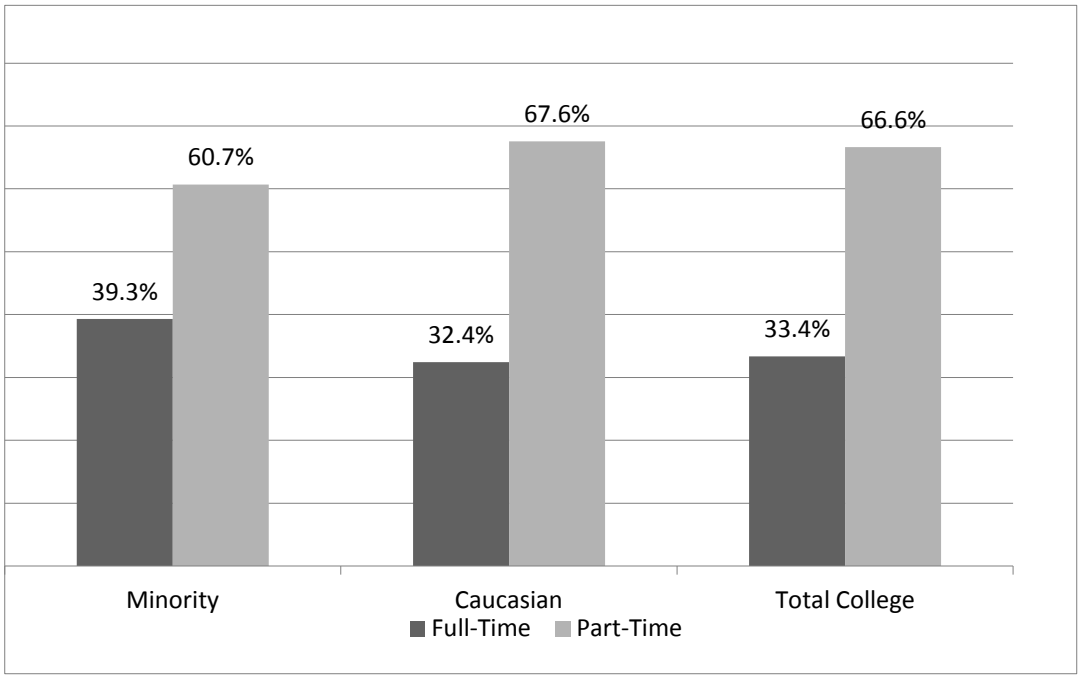

Figure 10. Full-Time/Part-Time Student Enrollment Fall 2011

Entering Student Data

In figure 11 on the following page, of students who enrolled in fall, 2011 and reported ethnicity, only full-time Hispanic students and those who identify with two or more races outnumber their part-time counterparts. Caucasian, African American, and Asian part-time students outnumber their full-time counterparts, and the enrollment percentage of part-time American Indian/Alaskan Native students is the same their full-time counterparts.

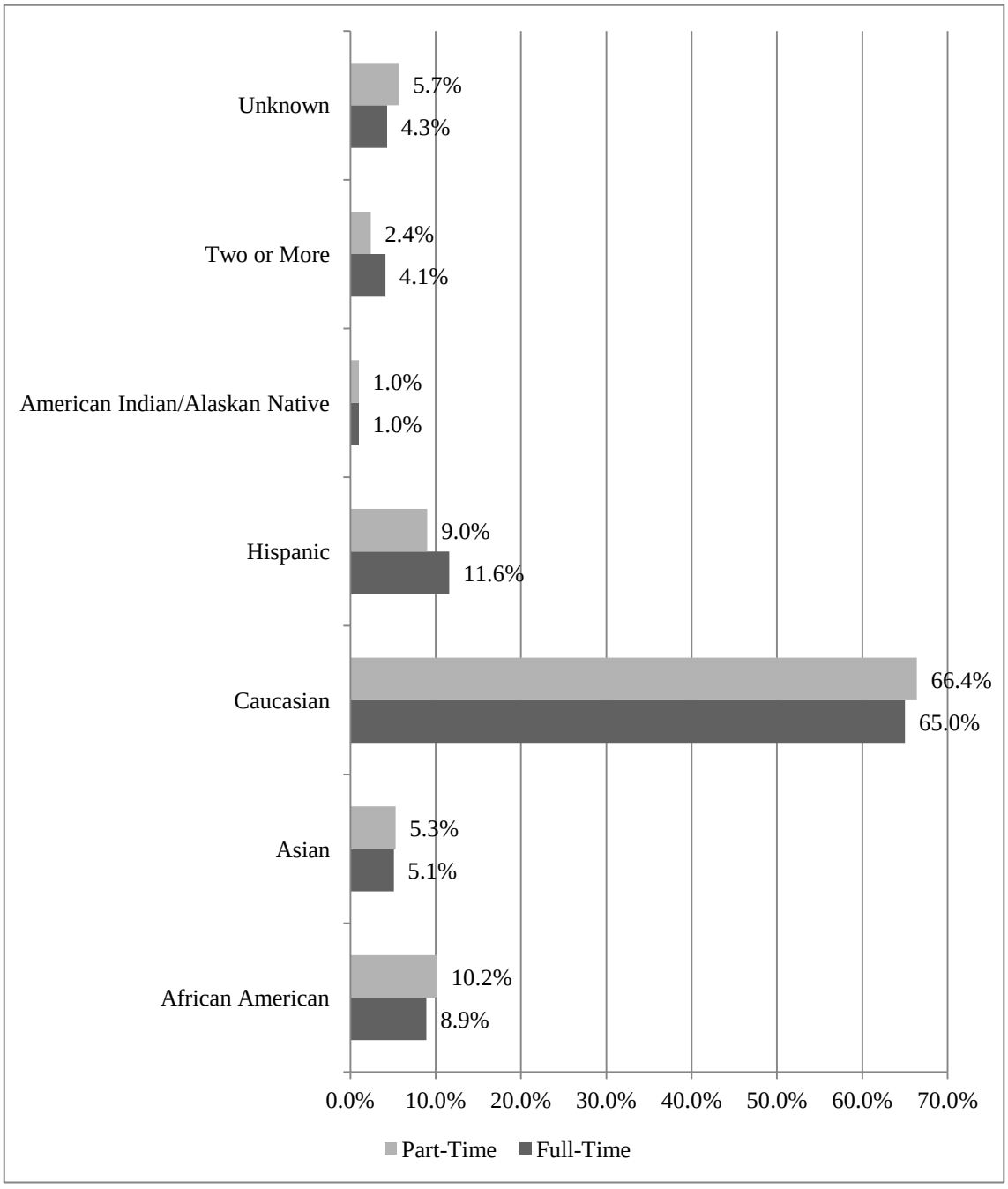

Figure 11. Fall 2011 Entering Students by Ethnicity and Enrollment Status

Retention Data

National Center for Education (2011) data indicate that the overall graduation rate is 16%, and the transfer out rate is 25%. For degree or certificate seeking students who began in 2007, 15.9% of full-time and 4.6% of part-time students completed within 150% of normal time. At 29%, non-resident aliens had the highest graduation rates followed by 17% for Asians/Pacific Islanders and Caucasian; 16% for those who did not report their ethnicity; 13% for Hispanic/Latinos and American Indian/Native Alaskans; and 8% for African Americans.

For students who entered in fall, 2010 and returned fall, 2011, institutional data indicate that Asian/Pacific Islanders and Hispanics had the highest retention rates. Of those who reported their ethnicity, 48% of Asian/Pacific Islanders; 46% of Hispanics; 45% of those who identify with two or more races; 41% of Caucasians; 39% of African Americans, and 29% of American Indian/Alaskan Native returned for a subsequent year.

Twenty-five percent of full-time and 51% of part-time students, who enrolled in fall, 2011, did not return for a second semester.

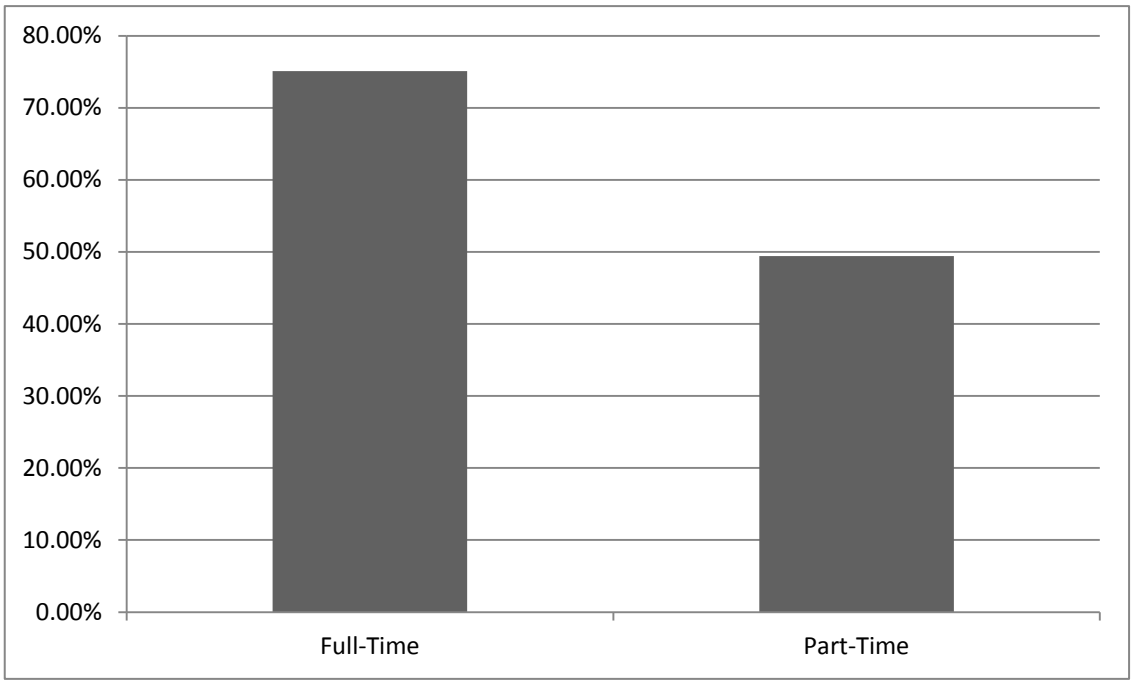

Figure 12. Fall 2011 to Spring 2012 Retention by Enrollment Status

Part-time students who identify with two or more races had the lowest retention rate for fall, 2011 to spring, 2012. Of part-time students who reported their ethnicity, Asian, Hispanic, and Caucasian students had the highest retention rates. Full-time students who identify with two or more races had the highest first-to-second semester retention rates, and full-time African American students had the lowest.

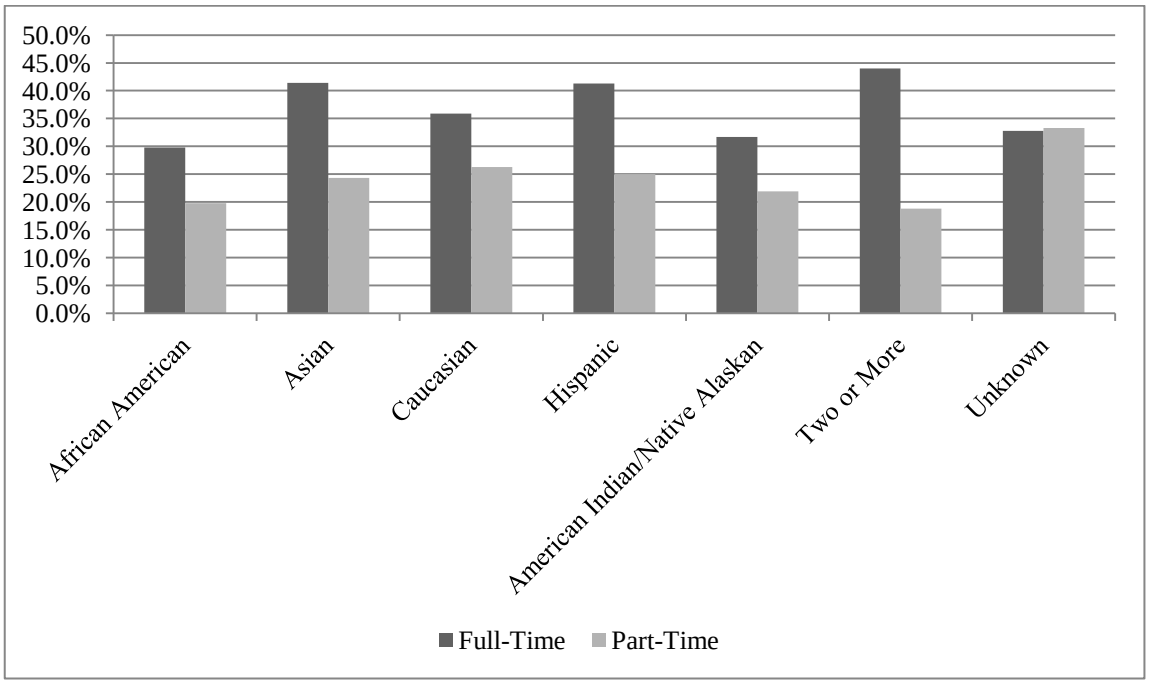

Figure 13. Fall 2011 to Spring 2012 Retention by Ethnicity and Enrollment Status

Of those with known parental status, part-time students with parents who did not have a degree had the lowest fall to spring retention rates. Part-time students with parents who attended the host institution had the highest retention rates of part-time students. Full-time students with parents, who had a college degree from an institution other than the host institution, had the highest retention rates of full-time students.

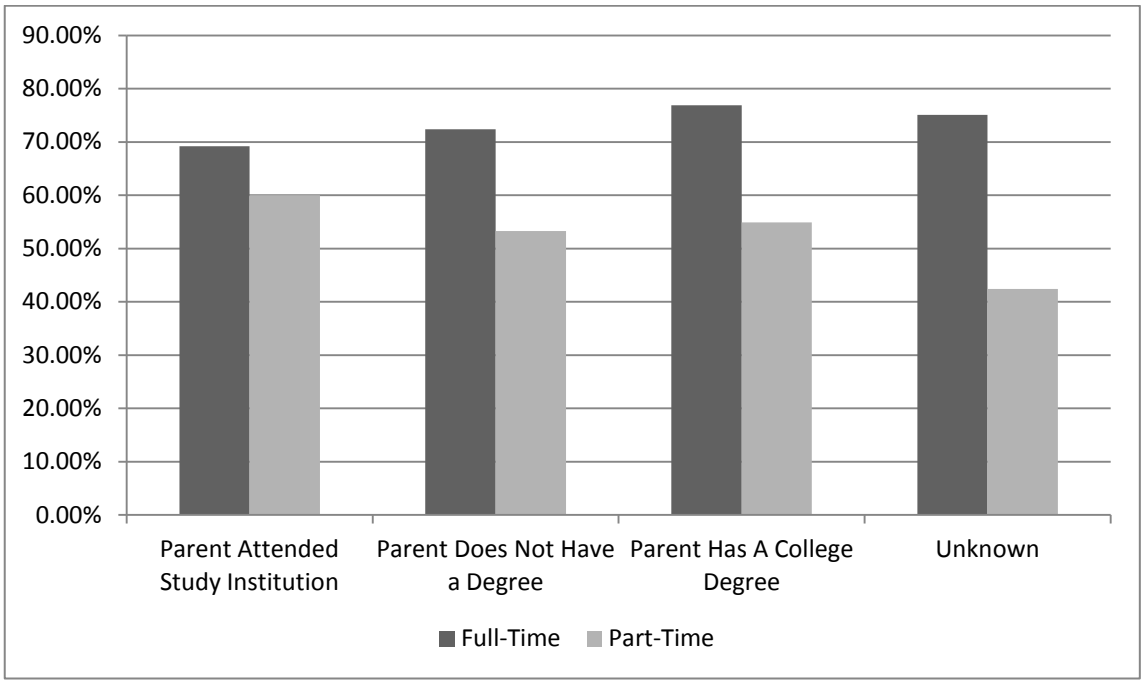

Figure 14. Fall 2011 to Spring 2012 First Generation Retention by Parent Education and Enrollment Status

Demographics of Study Participants

Prior to the start of each interview/focus group, demographic information was collected about each participant. The Demographic Data Form is located in (Appendix B).

Table 1

Demographic Data of Participants

Ethnicity of Study Participants	Full-Time Students	Percentage	Part-Time Students	Percentage
African American	1	8.33%	1	8.33%
Asian	1	8.33%	0	0%
Caucasian	6	50%	8	66.67%
Hispanic	3	25%	1	8.33%
American Indian	0	0%	1	8.33%
Two or more ethnic groups/Other	1	8.33%	1	8.33%

Gender	Full-Time Students	Part-Time Students
Female	50%	50%
Male	50%	50%

Marital Status	Full-Time Students	Part-Time Students
Single	75%	92%
Married	8%	8%
Divorced	17%	0%

Financial Aid	Full-Time Students	Part-Time Students
Yes	83%	67%
No	17%	33%

Average Hours Worked Per Week	
Full-Time Students	19.79 Hours
Part-Time Students	18.54 Hours

Plan to Earn Associates Degree	**Full-Time Students**	**Part-Time Students**
Yes	67%	75%
No	33%	0%
Undecided	0%	25%

Plan to Earn Technical Certificate	**Full-Time Students**	**Part-Time Students**
Yes	42%	33.3%
No	58%	33.3%
Undecided	0%	33.3%

At least one student from each ethnic group discussed was represented in the study; however, each ethnic group was not fully represented in each enrollment classification. There were no part-time students who identified themselves as Asian, and there were no full-time students who identified themselves as American Indian. The average age for part-time students was 21.5, and the average age for full-time students was 23.6.

Three full-time and five part-time participants had parents who had not attempted any type of higher education. The majority of full- and part-time students were single, received financial aid, worked at least part-time, and planned to earn an associate degree or technical certificate from the host institution. Half of full-time students and two-thirds of part-time students had a declared major in fall, 2011.

In addition to enrollment, retention, and participant data, the researcher utilized information from the Survey of Entering Student Engagement. The survey is designed to gauge students' early campus experiences.

Survey of Entering Student Engagement Data

The survey defines early connections, in general, as those experiences from the time of a student's decision to attend college through the end of the first three weeks of the first semester or quarter (CCCSE, 2010a). For purposes of this study, the conceptually related items on the SENSE, which are used to measure how connected students are to the campus, were used as the foundation for further investigation.

SENSE items:

1. The very first time I came to this college I felt welcome;
2. The college provided me with adequate information about financial assistance (scholarships, grants, loans, etc.);
3. A college staff member helped me determine whether I qualified for financial assistance;
4. At least one college staff member (other than an instructor) learned my name; and
5. Thinking about your experiences from the time of your decision to attend this college through the end of the semester or quarter, respond (answering yes or no): A specific person was assigned to me so I could see him/her each time I needed information or assistance (CCCSE, 2010d, paras. 2-3).

Benchmark scores for the early connections portion of the SENSE indicated that the research site had an overall early connections benchmark score of 48.8, which was below the national average of 50. The early connections benchmark score for full-time students was slightly above the national average at 50.6; however, the early connections benchmark score for part-time students was nearly three percentage points below full-time students at 47.9. The breakdown for each early connections question is provided:

1. **The very first time I came to this college, I felt welcome:**

Agree/Strongly Agree	72.7% PT	79% FT
Neutral	24.6% PT	18.7% FT
Disagree/Strong Disagree	2.6% PT	2.3% FT

2. **The college provided me with adequate information about financial aid:**

Agree/Strongly Agree	45.6% PT	54% FT
Neutral	35.1% PT	26.5% FT
Disagree/Strongly Disagree	19.3% PT	19.6% FT

3. **A college staff member helped me determine whether I qualified for financial assistance:**

Agree/Strongly Agree	26.7% PT	31.3% FT
Neutral	34% PT	28% FT
Disagree/Strongly Disagree	39.3% PT	40. 2% FT

4. **At least one college staff member (other than an instructor) remembered my name:**

Agree/Strongly Agree	42.4% PT	48.5% FT
Neutral	18.8% PT	17.6% FT
Disagree/Strongly Disagree	38.7% PT	33.8% FT

5. **A specific person was assigned to you so you could see him/her each time you needed information or assistance:**

Yes	19.8% PT	15.6% FT
No	80.2% PT	84.4% FT

Survey results indicate that part-time students had lower early connection scores on all but one question (#5), and as a percentage, part-time students chose a "neutral" response more often than full-time students.

Part-time Student Perceptions

Findings will include first-year, persisting, part-time students' perceptions of early campus connections and intentional connection strategies implemented by the host

institution (welcome week, telephone calls to new students, and use of the student lounge and campus center). Interview narratives revealed three overarching themes associated with part-time students' perceptions of factors that influenced their persistence: academic support, social influences, and family support and expectations. The theme social influences includes two sub-themes: participation in campus activities early in the semester and friendships. Because many part-time students included welcome week, which is an intentional connection, in their responses to campus participation questions, reflections associated with those interactions will be provided in the social influences section. Other intentional connections strategies such as telephone calls to new students and use of the student lounge and campus center will be presented separately.

For each theme/sub-theme, at least two participant narratives are provided to support the rationale for the findings. The participants are identified in the narratives as Pts (part-time student) followed by a randomly assigned number to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality. The researcher is identified as the Interviewer.

Reasons for Attending

To gain a better understanding of the context, it is fitting to understand why part-time students chose to enroll in this particular community college. When asked, students gave a number of reasons. The two most prevalent responses were the proximity of the institution to the student's home and low tuition costs.

Reflections on Reasons for Attending:

Interviewer: Describe the reasons that led you to enroll in this particular community college.

Pts#30: It was close to home, inexpensive, and it had the program, the major, that I wanted.

Pts#3: It is the best culinary arts program in this area, and I was told it was world-renowned or whatever.

Pts#31: I heard that there were really good classes and much cheaper than going to other schools.

Front Door Experiences

The advising, financial aid, and registration processes are important access points for new students. For many, these experiences provide the initial contact with the institution. The majority of part-time students participated in the advising and financial aid processes; however, when asked if there was a specific person at the college they could contact for questions or help, most said "no." In general, students knew they could get help from the student success center or from their professors, but only two students indicated they would contact advisors.

Advising. Students who score into college level reading and writing courses may register without advising; however, those who score into developmental reading and writing courses have a hold placed on their registration and must speak with an advisor before completing the registration process. Although not all part-time students were required to seek advising, all but one met with an advisor to assist with course selection and registration. The student who did not meet with an advisor registered online with the help of a parent.

Part-time students who came to campus to talk with advisors indicated they were pleased with the quality of their advising experience; however, at least two were frustrated with the long lines and wait times of 30 minutes or more. The majority of students felt that advising was helpful and remarked that advisors kept them from enrolling in classes that were not appropriate for their program major or transfer goals. Students also seemed confident about advisors' levels of expertise.

Reflections on Advising:

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience with advising?

Pts#32: It was a really good experience. She was really helpful. She asked me what I had planned on doing and why I had come here and stuff like that. She then pointed me into what classes I needed to take and transfer out. She gave me the gen eds and she gave me a list of what I need to have to get there. She got me pointed in the right direction of what classes I needed to take – a lot of the classes I wanted to take or I felt I needed to take, I didn't really need so I was able to transfer into different classes. She was really nice and helpful.

Pts#25: All the advisors that I've dealt with have been very respectful – they've always done everything they can to help me. I think the staff on campus is really, really here for the students. That is their main goal – to see us succeed.

Financial aid process. Part-time students received much of their information about financial aid while in high school, from friends, through sibling experiences, or from the college website. Three students indicated they did not need financial aid because their parents or grandparents were paying their expenses. Two part-time students relied solely on their parents to complete the Free Application for Federal

Student Aid (FAFSA) and handle the financial aid process, and the remaining students either completed the forms on their own or sought help from the financial aid office. The three part-time students, who contacted the financial aid office in person or via telephone, found the experience to be helpful. The majority of communication about financial aid was provided via the college website or through email exchanges with the college, federal government, and student loan providers.

Reflections on Financial Aid Process:

Interviewer: How did you learn about financial aid (grants, scholarships, loans)?

Pts#32: That would probably be a mixture of my parents, because I have an older sister and she went through the whole process – and plus at my high school, starting my junior year, our counselor would come and talk to us. She would tell us to set up this and they would have special nights where if your parents needed to know how to do it, we would have them go to the auditorium and they would teach them like how to go through the FAFSA - ever since high school, they've kind of said if you want to go to college, this is what you need and these are the steps.

Interviewer: How did you learn whether you qualified for financial aid?

Pts#32: I think my mom normally takes care of all the FAFSA stuff since there are two of us – I think we got a letter talking about that I was going to get some kind of aid from the school or something like that.

Interviewer: What about financial aid – how did you learn about financial aid like loans, grants or scholarships?

Pts#30: At the school's website.

Interviewer: How did you find out if you qualified or not? Did you get an email or letter – how did that work?

Pts#30: Emails between the school and directly from my loan provider.

Interviewer: OK – did you get any help with the financial aid process from the college staff here?

Pts#30 Yes, I spoke to a couple of different people on the phone because I had filled some stuff out wrong.

Interviewer: OK – was that helpful?

Pts#30: Yes – very.

Improving advising and financial aid. When part-time students were given an opportunity to make suggestions about ways the college could improve financial aid and advising for new students, participants made a variety of suggestions: extending financial aid and advising office hours for evening students, informing students about Compass test preparation, requiring mandatory face-to-face new student orientation, decreasing wait times for advising, and finding ways for new students to connect with recent graduates who are working in their chosen career field.

According to the college website, students must participate in a new student orientation prior to seeing an advisor; however, students indicated they did not take the online orientation seriously. Only one part-time student mentioned that she attended a face-to-face orientation meeting with the director of her program.

One student expressed concern that his Compass test results required that he begin in developmental courses and this was a waste of his time. He felt that had he been

given an opportunity to prepare for the test that he may have scored into college level courses.

Two students felt that wait times were too long. Students were required to wait 30 minutes to an hour to see an advisor. For those who had off campus obligations, having to wait indefinitely created scheduling conflicts.

To minimize wait times in advising, students suggested that the college develop a system that would designate advising days and times for new and returning students. A student's enrollment status would determine the day and time that the student would come to the campus for advising/financial aid services.

One student was concerned about the ability to make the most of his college experience. As a new student, he felt that if students were able to connect with recent college graduates working in their chosen career field, this would encourage students to take advantage of all the program and college has to offer and be better prepared for entry into the workforce.

As students made various suggestions, it became apparent that communication was the primary concern. Although the college website has an incredible amount of valuable information, and in general, part-time students expressed contentment with advising and financial aid experiences, they still seemed to feel that, in order to make informed decisions, they needed to receive clear, consistent information in a more personal way.

Reflections on Improving Financial Aid and Advising Experiences

Interviewer: What could this college do to improve the advising and financial aid experiences for new students?

Pts#32: I feel like if they had a little bit more – um not consistency – I'm trying to think of the word. If they were like more together about different deals – I feel a lot of times when I call, I hear different things from different people – maybe just some more communication between them. I think they should have some type of deal set up – whenever you enroll, it's always like here is the period of time – just show up. I feel like if they had set aside – if this is your first semester and these are certain days where you alone can come and talk to a counselor, talk to financial aid, and then if you are going to graduate, here is where you need to show up and talk. It's just a few weeks and everyone shows up at the same time.

Pts#34: I can't really say more counselors because they have a lot as far as I'm concerned – maybe have a better scheduling for the times that the offices are open. I know that people go home but maybe have a better scheduling time – longer hours. That first meeting I had, it took us 30 minutes to an hour to get in – there were a lot of people and nowhere to sit down so we were wandering around…I'd say open the offices a little longer than they are.

Pts#25: I know the orientation – they really – there was an online orientation that I didn't really pay any attention to it – I heard from other students that an orientation process should be more proficient than we have – just to orient us with the campus itself and with the admission process, and everything available to students on campus. There is a lot of stuff that I didn't really know until I got into the center, and then it was made apparent to me.

Interviewer: Do you think they should do the orientation online or in person?

Pts#25: I think it should be more in person. I also think it should be more mandatory – while they say an orientation is mandatory, people are not paying attention to it. I think if we had it in person and mandatory, students would get what they actually need out of it instead of blowing it off and thinking it wasn't important.

Telephone Calls to New Students (Intentional Institutional Connection)

Two-thirds of part-time students did not remember receiving a call prior to their first semester. Those who received calls from campus staff say they found it helpful and welcoming. Students appreciated the reminders about semester start dates, upcoming events, and the opportunity to ask questions.

Reflections on Telephone Calls to New Students:

Interviewer: Did anyone call you before classes started to connect with you?

Pts#31: Yeah – it was helpful because it was like they think of you and encourage you to come to the events.

Pts#3: Yes – I had someone call me, I think it was a couple of days before, and they were telling me that you need to make sure that you are leaving earlier than you think you have to because it takes forever to park and the first day is the worst – do you have all your classes – do you have this ready, and this ready? It was kind of a confirmation that hey you are coming and here are some tips.

Interviewer: Was that helpful?

Pts#3: Yes it was.

Student Lounge and Campus Center (Institutional Intentional Connection)

Most part-time students were aware of the student lounge and campus center; however, the perceptions about the spaces were mixed. Among the seven who visited the student lounge, three described the space as good but noisy, crowded, or rowdy, and others said they liked the space or it was a good place to relax.

Less than half of part-time students visited the campus center. Those who visited did so as part of a class or workshop. At least two students mentioned that noise spills over from the student lounge into the campus center and impedes activities that are taking place there.

Reflections on the Student Lounge and Campus Center

Interviewer: How do you feel about the student lounge?

Pts#16: I think it's good but it is always crowded and real noisy – I don't go in there much.

Pts#25: I've been in there – I know they have a lot of great stuff in there but it's more of a rowdy atmosphere then I like so I don't really go much. I know they have the iPads and staff and you can rent them, which is awesome.

Pts#5: I actually thought – I mean – I like how both of them are close together but yet there can be some negative to that because – I did have this specific issue…I can't think how to describe it but basically the other room was so loud because everyone was having fun…I just think it would be perfect if it was just one more room or a couple of rooms down.

Factors in Part-time Students' Persistence

Academic support. Two-thirds of part-time students said that faculty influenced their persistence in the first semester, and when they were asked what had the greatest overall impact on their decision to re-enroll, they felt that faculty support was instrumental in their persistence.

Reflections on Greatest Overall Impact:

Interviewer: As you reflect on your first semester, can you tell me what had the greatest impact on your decision to re-enroll/continue?

Pts#25: Probably my English professor. He was very strict and made it very apparent that this is a very serious college atmosphere and if we are going to be here, we should be here seriously. That really made a turnaround for me in my mind. I had a future if I wanted it.

Interviewer: As you reflect on your first semester, can you tell me what had the greatest impact on your decision to re-enroll/continue?

Pts#34: Can I say a teacher? My teacher was a great help and she kind of opened my eyes a little bit when it came to stuff so I decided to come back. She told me if I ever wanted to email her or needed help with anything, I could go to her. That was great.

Pts#30: How helpful the teachers were as far as being available all the time, answering questions, even silly stuff – answering emails – just how helpful they were to reach out and help when you needed it.

During the first semester, three part-time students considered dropping out. In two instances, faculty support made a positive difference. Both students completed the semester and returned for a subsequent semester. The third student credited a tutor with helping him to complete the semester.

Reflections on Dropping Out:

Interviewer: During your first semester, did you ever think about dropping out?

Pts#34: Yes – at one point – I think it was three weeks in. I was – my grades were starting to slip and I thought if I took a break and

came back the next semester, I could do it but I buckled down, talked to my teacher, got everything done.

Interviewer: What helped you decide to stay?

Pts#34: My two teachers – they were a huge help. I scheduled a meeting and they helped me with my work. That was the main reason I stayed – they told me I could do it and they motivated me.

Pts#32: There is one point that I had – I started having to work a bunch of hours and I had to close almost every night so I was sleeping through all of my classes. I wondered why I was wasting my money if I'm just going to sleep through my classes. I kind of thought about it – I figured it would be better if I would just finish off the semester and start off this semester with a fresh view.

Interviewer: What helped you decide to stay?

Pts32: I think it was really – a couple of the teachers I had really helped – I talked to them and they were telling me what I missed and I know that they understand that there are things you can't control.

Social influences. Part-time students felt that social influences made a positive difference in their persistence. Participating in campus activities and having friends helped students feel more connected to the campus environment.

In the study, two-thirds of part-time students participated in activities in the first six weeks of their first semester. Those who did not participate either worked full-time, had family responsibilities, or spent their free time with friends away from campus. Students believed that participating in campus activities helped them feel more

connected to the campus and agreed that participating made them feel good about their choice to attend this particular college.

When part-time students discussed participating in activities and events, they often reflected on the importance of meeting new people, making friends, spending time with classmates, learning about clubs and organizations, and enjoying time away from their studies. For those who did not have friends on campus, participating in activities and getting involved with student clubs helped them get acclimated. Two students indicated that participating in activities early in the first semester encouraged them to go to events later in their first semester and look forward to upcoming events in their second semester.

Reflections on Campus Participation:

Interviewer: Within your first six weeks on campus, what kinds of activities or events (if any) did you participate in?

Pts#34: Oh man – I don't remember the name of the event but they had food out in the courtyard where the walkways are. They had a ballroom dancing thing that I took just to try it out – there was a college meeting day where they had people from colleges and you lined up to visit. That was about it. Other than that, I go to the movies that they show – you bring your student ID and go watch a free movie.

Interviewer: Do you think that participating in those activities helped you to connect with the campus and feel like this was a good decision to come here?

Pts#34: Yes – and you get to meet a lot of new people. I hang out with those people now.

Interviewer: Within your first six weeks on campus, what kinds of activities or events (if any) did you participate in?

Pts#5: I got involved with – I think I was at the point of – yeah, yeah – swing club, international club, I tried getting involved with outdoor club – I signed up for it but there was miscommunication and I never actually got to go to a meeting throughout the semester.

Interviewer: Do you think that participating in those activities helped you connect to the campus environment and help you feel confident about your decision to come here?

Pts#5: Yes, especially international club – that is one that really stuck out and made me feel welcome.

Welcome week event. Half of part-time students attended the fall welcome week event, and those who did, viewed the event as a good opportunity to meet other students and learn about campus clubs and organizations. Students did not attend because they were not on campus when events were being held, had work/family obligations, or simply chose not to participate.

Reflections on Welcome Week:

Interviewer: Do you recall Welcome Week?

Pts#25: Yes

Interviewer: What was your experience with that?

Pts#25: Well I think I talked to 15 clubs on campus and I ended up joining actively three plus the student senate – I would say it was good.

Interviewer: Do you recall Welcome Week?

Pts#16: I did campus kick off, the one that is in the first week, and – I think I did an international club.

Interviewer: Do you think that participating helped you connect with the campus environment?

Pts#16: Oh yeah.

Interviewer: Can you think of why you felt that way?

Pts#16: I didn't really know a lot of people besides people through my sister, but I got involved with the international club pretty quick and I knew a couple of people at the desk, the student activity people, and there was just a connection – I started meeting a whole lot of people and see them around campus. It was a lot of fun.

Friendships. Half of part-time students indicated that friends had some influence on their persistence. For these students, friends provided support as well as accountability. Students enjoyed seeing their friends on campus and felt a responsibility to attend class and carry out responsibilities related to club assignments.

Students who did not have friends on campus said that being lonely hampered their participation in campus activities. After the first semester, one-third of part-time students knew at least one friend who dropped out of this college. According to students, friends most often dropped out due to financial reasons.

Reflections on Friendship Influences:

Interviewer: How did your friends and acquaintances influence your decision to return to college?

Pts#32: Well – let's see – last semester, my friend and I used to carpool. It was like an accountability thing – if I don't go to school, then she doesn't have a ride. If I don't wake up in time, then she wastes her gas trying to come and get me. This semester, I actually have a class with one of my friends and it is really another accountability thing – I

have to show up. They are really good about making sure they wake me up now.

Interviewer: How did your friends and acquaintances influence your decision to return to college?

Pts#25: Yes and no – I mean most of me coming back is because I really want to accomplish my goals, but I also feel like if I didn't come back, the other senators would have been disappointed not to see me and some of the other club members would have more to take on than if I wasn't here.

Interviewer: How did your friends and acquaintances influence your decision to return to college?

Pts#3: I'm lonely a lot – since I'm only here one day a week, and I have this friend that was going to be taking the program with me but she is going to another college first so she won't be here for a little while. I'm all alone – what do I do? So I just do homework or play on my notebook or something. I think that is my only problem is that I'm lonely – I want to go somewhere with people.

Family Support and Expectations

Five part-time students expressed that their families had an influence on first semester persistence. These students described the role of their family in terms of encouragement, monetary support, and expectations. Three of the five students referenced a sibling in college or one who recently graduated, and these students felt that parents expected them to pursue a college education to ensure they had a bright future.

Reflections on the Role of the Family

Interviewer: Within your first semester here, what influences (peer relationships, faculty, staff, administration), do you feel contributed to your persistence at the college?

Pts#16: Of course my sister, and my dad – he always pushed for us to go to college – I think it is important.

Pts#34: Well, my dad, for one. He kind of – he was an influence because he went to tech school so I felt like I needed to one up him in a way – maybe transfer to a four year college and get a major. That and he is real straight forward – if I failed or dropped out, then I would owe him money cause I wasted his money on this.

Pts#32: …My parents are like if you don't go to college here, then you are just going to have to do another community college. You can't just take off a semester because my mom knows – she ended up dropping out of college because she missed classes. She told me she always wanted to go back but she never went back – the longer you are away from something, the harder it is to get yourself to go back to it. She said I was either finishing here or going somewhere else – they were not going to let me drop out of college.

Full-Time Students' Perceptions

Findings include first-year, persisting, full-time students' perceptions of early campus connections and perceptions of experiences with intentional connection strategies that the host institution implemented (welcome week, telephone calls to new students, and use of the student lounge and campus center), and perceptions of factors that influenced persistence of full-time students.

Interview narratives revealed four overarching themes associated with full-time students' perceptions of factors that influenced their persistence: academic support, social influences, family support and motivation, and academic success. The social

influences theme includes two sub-themes: participation in campus activities early in the semester and friendships. Like part-time students, full-time students included welcome week, which is an intentional connection, in their responses to campus participation questions, and reflections associated with those interactions will be provided in the social influences section. The other intentional connections strategies such as telephone calls to new students and use of student lounge and campus center will be presented separately.

For each theme/sub-theme, at least two participant narratives are included to support the findings. The participants are identified in the narratives as Fts (full-time student) followed by a randomly assigned number to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality. The researcher is identified as the Interviewer.

Reasons for Attending

Full-time students gave a number of reasons for choosing this particular community college; however, most chose to enroll because it was close to home and inexpensive to attend.

Reflections on Reasons for Attending:

Interviewer: Describe the reasons that led you to enroll in this particular community college:

Fts#28: Well, initially, I wasn't going to go to this college because I was fully convinced that I wanted to start at a four year university, move away from home, but I had to face the reality that a lot of the finances that had to be covered weren't going to be covered all the way and I didn't want to take out a bunch of loans.

Fts#29: Mainly because it was close and in the state and reasonable.

Fts#9: My primary reasons were financial – the significantly lower cost of tuition.

Front Door Experiences

Like part-time students, full-time students knew they could get help from the student success center and their professors, but when asked if there was a specific person they went to for questions or help, most said "no." Only one full-time student indicated she would contact her advisor for questions or help.

During the first semester, all full-time students in the study sought advising, and one-fourth specifically spoke to an adviser to ensure that courses would transfer to another institution. All but one full-time student was pleased with the quality of advising. Two other students, who were pleased with the quality of their advising, mentioned long lines and wait times.

Reflections on Advising

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience with advising?

Fts#21: Initially, it was troublesome – I didn't fully understand the program – I don't know if it was my lack of understanding or bad communication – the advisors helped – the wait in line to get through to an advisor was a big complaint of mine – I wish it was a faster process – it always seems with me that I do understand what is going on and I just need a quick answer and even with the quick advisors when I tried to use them, they would tell me that I have to wait. Then I wait and the actual advisors says here you go and I'm gone in five seconds. I've waited two hours. It hasn't been a whole welcoming experience with advising – they do answer the questions and I do get my – whatever I needed, but not in a timely manner by any means.

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience with advising.

Fts#8: Well, it was just long – there was a big line and lots of waiting and everything but they try to help you out…She didn't really want me to take – my counselor didn't want me to take classes that I wouldn't need when I transfer…

Financial aid process. In general, full-time students received financial aid information while in high school, from friends and family members, or from the college website. Perceptions were mixed for those who reached out for assistance.

Half of full-time students completed the financial aid process without assistance from the financial aid office. Five sought assistance, and one chose not to accept financial aid from the college. Of the six who completed the process without help, four indicated they managed the process on their own, one relied solely on her parents, and one received help from a GED center. Three of the five who received assistance felt that is was helpful, and two felt the process was confusing.

Reflections on Financial Aid Process:

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience with the financial aid process.

Fts#28: I felt they genuinely wanted to help me and to reach out to me. They do make a point of being available. I know recently they are starting to do some instant messaging – you can go online and ask them a quick question without having to come in and possibly without an appointment. I think they make themselves very available.

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience with the financial aid process.

Fts#12: I really didn't know much about it. Even being on a team or being in the theatre department, I found it really hard to get the right information – when was I going to get my scholarship and how was it going to work. It took me a long time to figure that out and to find the right person to talk to. I really didn't know who to go to and I had to do a lot of research.

Fts#9: I looked online and asked the counselor a few questions, but I never really came to understand financial aid, and honestly, I still don't understand it.

Interviewer: In terms of getting significant help from college staff for financial aid, would you say it was difficult knowing who to go to and what information to ask for, how to access financial aid – do I understand that correctly?

Fts#9: Yes

Improving advising and financial aid. When full-time students were asked how the college could improve financial aid and advising for new students, the responses varied. Three students felt the services were adequate and had no suggestions; three mentioned the college should get more information out to students about enrollment, paying tuition, etc., and at least two students commented on the long lines and wait times for advising. Other responses included providing more information about scholarship guidelines, releasing registration holds so that students do not have to come to campus to handle registration matters, and implementing admission standards.

Although one-fourth of students felt the advising and financial aid processes were helpful and offered no suggestions, the majority of others had an interest in receiving more timely information from the college.

Reflections on Improving Financial Aid and Advising:

Interviewer: What could this college do to improve advising and financial aid experiences for new students?

Fts#21: For new students? I know there is not a whole lot they can do about lines but when someone has to stand there for 2 hours, it just gets overwhelming and you get to thinking you are doing something wrong. When you do get in and out, you really just don't like what is going on. If you were confused, it wouldn't be a good situation at all. I don't know if there would be a way for more – like a phone call one on one – a checklist that could be gone through with new students – make sure you have this. I know all of this is on paper and you are a college student and an adult, you should be able to handle this stuff, but it does get overwhelming and maybe an immediate phone line that you could call. The waiting in line just gets overwhelming.

Fts#28 Maybe if you could get a few more emails explaining enrollment, maybe like a phone call or two, just telling you that I should hurry up and pay and I should enroll soon, buy books, and be able to help out a little bit more.

Telephone Calls to New Students (Intentional Institutional Connection)

Three-fourths of full-time students did not remember receiving a phone call prior to the start of the fall semester; however, those who received a phone call thought it was helpful.

Reflections on Telephone Calls to New Students:

Interviewer: Did anyone call you before classes started to connect with you?

Fts#15: Yes-- they were calling to basically see if I needed any help as far as getting around the campus – if I was ready – it seemed like a kind of welcome wagon call.

Interviewer: Did you appreciate that?

Fts#15: Yes

Interviewer: Before you started classes in the fall, did anyone call you to touch base with you about classes starting and all that kind of thing?

Fts#13: Yes they did. They called me and they sent me an email.

Interviewer: Was that helpful?

Fts#13: It was. They also sent me emails about when classes start, dropped dates, or your tuition is paid or this is how much you need to pay, or this is how much you are getting back – that helps.

Student Lounge and Campus Center (Intentional Institution Connection)

The majority of full-time students had visited the student lounge and campus center. Five of the seven students, who had visited the student lounge, enjoyed the experience and thought it was a good place to spend time with friends and relax. Two full-time students cited lackadaisical staff, and "weird" kids as the reasons they were disappointed with their experiences.

Half of full-time students had visited the campus center for workshops or student club meetings, and two mentioned that noise from the student lounge was an issue.

Reflections on Student Lounge and Campus Center:

Interviewer: Have you visited the student lounge? What do you think about that space?

Fts#8: The student lounge – I went during the Christmas thing. That is pretty much it. Other than that, I don't go. There are some weird kids there.

Interviewer: Have you visited the campus center? What do you think about that space?

Fts#17: I once sat in there to just get homework done. I was like – it was nice but since it is so close to the lounge, you can hear the sound effects coming from the TVs and people talking loud and cursing a blue streak from time to time, but otherwise, it's nice – I prefer the library though.

Academic Support

In the first semester, half of full-time students felt that caring, knowledgeable faculty were influential in their persistence. Students most often discussed the assistance and support they received.

Reflections on Faculty Support:

Interviewer: Within your first semester here, what influences do you feel contributed to your persistence?

Fts#20: My math teacher – I had a really hard time – I had a death in the family and she helped me a lot. She was more than understanding. She walked me through everything and offered her support and was more than just a teacher.

Fts#21: I would say faculty for sure. That would be number one. All [of] the faculty within the paralegal program I highly respect, I enjoy their classes – I learn a lot. I do like that.

Social Influences

The second theme that emerged for full-time students was the importance of social influences on their persistence. Participating in campus activities early in the semester and having friends helped full-time students feel connected to the institution.

Half of full-time students participated in campus activities in the first six weeks of the semester. Those who did not participate worked full-time, were not on campus when events were held, or chose not to attend. When full-time students discussed participating in campus activities, they primarily remarked about the opportunity to meet new people and how getting involved helped them feel more a part of the college. One student said that participating in activities gave him a sense of school pride.

Reflections on Participating in Campus Activities:

Interviewer: Within the first six weeks of the semester, what kinds of activities did you participate in?

Fts#6: I went to a couple of bible study classes, and other than that I was just hanging out on campus trying to meet new people.

Interviewer: Did you feel like participating in those activities, helped you connect better to the campus environment and feel like you had made a good decision to come here?

Fts#6: Yeah – it did – it made me feel more like a part of the campus since I got to meet all new people on campus, where they came from, and just kind of made it more comfortable for me to be here.

Interviewer: Within the first six weeks of the semester, what kinds of activities did you participate in?

Fts#26: No – not many – just orientation – just for the organization of Club Luna – that is the only thing I got involved with because I'm not on campus that much. It was something that I have interest in doing.

Interviewer: Do you feel like participating in that club helped you connect to the campus environment and help you feel good about the choice of coming to this college?

Fts#26: Yes – you get to meet more people and do things on campus. That way you meet more than just the people in the club. It was something helpful to get involved with.

Welcome week. Half of full-time students participated in the fall welcome week activities. Those who attended felt that is was fun and a good way to meet new people and learn about the various student groups on campus. Those who did not participate generally said they were busy with classes, not on campus, or not interested in attending.

Reflections on Welcome Week:

Interviewer: Do you recall Welcome Week?

Fts#9: I think it was a really great opportunity to see a lot of the different groups on campus, especially the clubs. They were all arranged outside and I could go and see what all of them were about and meet all the different people.

Interviewer: Do you recall Welcome Week?

Fts#8: I think it's fun – I liked it. Everyone is having fun and you get to meet a lot of new people.

Friendships. Nearly half of full-time students indicated that friends influenced their persistence. For these students, friends primarily provided support and motivation. The majority of full-time students, who did not feel that friends influenced their persistence, did not elaborate on specifically why they felt that way. Two students did express that they felt responsible for their own futures.

Reflections on Friendship Influences:

Interviewer: How did your friends or acquaintances influence your decision to return to college?

Fts#17: Seeing some of my friends graduating from college, going on to be able to have jobs that they absolutely love – that's what I want.

Interviewer: Do your friends play a big part in staying at this college?

Fts#8: Yes – he helped me enroll and everything. He keeps telling me he is going to graduate so I need to graduate too.

Interviewer: So you think it is encouraging that you have friends here?

Fts#8: Yes – if you don't have friends, it's lonely and no one really cares that much.

Interviewer: Did your friends or acquaintances influence your decision to return to college this semester?

Fts#15: No – no, I knew it was something that I needed to push forward and get my degree.

Family Support and Encouragement

One-third of full-time students felt that family support was instrumental in their persistence. During the first semester, one student credited his wife, parents, and in-laws with convincing him not to drop out. When discussing family involvement, students generally spoke about the encouragement they received. Two students used the term "push" to describe family support.

Reflections on Family Support:

Interviewer: Within the first semester here, what influences do you feel have contributed to your persistence?

Fts#6: My parents are very pushy on school and everything, especially my mom. My mom stopped going to college and she regrets that so she pushes it a lot.

Interviewer: Within the first semester here, what influences do you feel have contributed to your persistence?

Fts#17: I would say most importantly, my wife pushed because if I wasn't able to pursue this thing, we would be in a rut and the last thing I need is an angry wife.

Academic Success

One-fourth of full-time students credited their academic success in the first semester with having the greatest overall impact on their persistence. Students' good grades and academic success in the first semester gave them confidence to enroll in the second semester.

Reflections on Academic Success:

Interviewer: As you reflect on your first semester, can you tell me what had the greatest impact on your decision to re-enroll/continue?

Fts#28: I would say the success from my first semester because I knew that transitioning from high school to college would be a lot different and I would say that being on the president's honor roll, finding out that I had accomplished that dream made me proud especially because I did my CNA as well and I was able to do that while taking 18 credits and doing clinical Tuesday and Wednesdays.

Interviewer: As you reflect on your first semester, can you tell me what had the greatest impact on your decision to re-enroll/continue?

Fts#15: Probably the fact that I passed everything last semester was the biggest. Just knowing that I can do it.

Comparison of Full- and Part-time Students' Perceptions

The following provides a summary of full- and part-time student perceptions of early campus connections and a comparison follows.

Table 2

Full-Time Students' Perceptions of Early Connections

Research Sub-Question A.
What are first-year, persisting full-time students' perceptions of early campus connections?

Full-Time Students	
Advising	• Pleased with quality • Helpful in course selection for transfer • Long lines and wait times • Need information about campus environment
Financial Aid	• Perceptions mixed: helpful/confusing • Need information about accessing financial aid
Participation in Campus Activities	• Opportunity to meet people • Feel more connected to the college
Welcome Week	• Meet people • Learn about campus clubs
Telephone Calls to New Students	• 75% did not receive call; • Calls received: helpful and welcoming
Student Lounge & Campus Center	• Student lounge: Mixed perceptions, noisy, lackadaisical staff, great place to relax • Campus center: club meetings, activities: noise from student lounge

Table 3

Part-Time Students' Perceptions of Early Connections

Research Sub-Question B. **What the first-year, persisting part-time students' perceptions of early campus connections?**	
Part-Time Students	
Advising	• Pleased with quality • Helpful in determining majors and course selection • Long lines and wait times • Need more information about campus environment
Financial aid	• Pleased with assistance
Participation in campus activities	• Opportunity to meet people • Make friends • Spend time with classmates • Feel more connected to campus
Welcome Week	• Meet people • Learn about campus clubs
Telephone calls to new students	• 66% did not receive call; • Calls received: helpful
Student lounge/campus center	• Student Lounge: mixed perceptions, crowded, rowdy, noisy, great place to relax • Campus Center: student workshops; noise from student lounge

Research Sub-Question C: What are notable differences in the perceptions reported by first-year, persisting, full- and part-time students regarding early campus connections?

As noted above, full- and part-time students had similar perceptions about most early campus connections. Both full- and part-time students were pleased with the quality of advising they received; both full- and part-time students remarked about long lines and wait times for advising; both full- and part-time students felt that participating

in activities helped them feel more connected to the campus; both full- and part-time students felt that welcome week provided them with opportunities to meet new people, make friends, and learn about student clubs; both full- and part-time students, who received "welcome" calls, found them helpful; and both felt that, in order to make informed decisions, they needed more information about navigating the campus environment. Unlike part-time students, some full-time students found the financial aid process to be confusing and difficult to access.

Both full- and part-time students had mixed perceptions about the student lounge and both liked the campus center. Full- and part-time students liked the concept of a space such as the student lounge; however, for some, the atmosphere was lacking. Full- and part-time students enjoyed activities in the campus center; however, noise that spilled over from the student lounge was a bother.

Perceptions of the Role of Early Campus Connections in Persistence

The study was designed to qualitatively describe first-year, persisting, full- and part-time students' perceptions about the role of early campus connections in their decision to persist. Based on the data collected, full- and part-time students did not perceive that early connections, as defined in this study, played a significant role in their persistence.

The financial aid and advising processes were necessary steps in pursuing their education, but neither was discussed as meaningful in terms of developing connections to the institution or persistence. Full- and part-time students did consider one of the host

community college's institutional connection strategies as playing a role in their persistence. For full- and part-time students, welcome week was instrumental in helping them make friends, get involved, and connect to the campus environment.

Table 4 summarizes the factors that first-year, second semester, full- and part-time students perceived as positively impacting their persistence:

Table 4

Factors That Influenced Full- and Part-Time Students' Persistence

Factors that Positively Influenced Full- and Part-time Students' Persistence

	Full-time	Part-time
Academic Support	• First semester influence	• First semester/overall
Social Influences		
Participation in campus activities	• Welcome week • Campus events • Student clubs/organizations	• Welcome week • Campus events • Student clubs/organizations
Friendships	• Support/motivation	• Support/accountability
Family Support	• Family support/encouragement	• Family support/expectation
First Semester Academic Success	• Academic success = confidence to persist	

Full-time and part-time students felt that academic support was instrumental in their persistence. Part-time students felt that faculty support had the greatest overall impact on their persistence. Full-time students felt that faculty support had a role in first

semester persistence; however, they credited their own academic success with having the greatest overall impact on their persistence. Full-time students believed that making good grades and being successful in the first semester gave them confidence to return the second semester.

Social influences were significant for full- and part-times students. Both perceived that participation in campus activities helped them to feel "more a part" of the campus and good about their choice to attend this particular college. Getting involved and meeting new people early in the semester was particularly meaning for full- and part-time students who did not already have friends on campus.

Friendships were also important for both full- and part-time students, but in different ways. Full-time students described their friendships as supportive and motivating. They were encouraged and motivated by their friends' academic, financial, and employment successes. Part-time students described their friendships in terms of support and accountability. Part-time students felt a responsibility to their friends to attend classes and share classroom notes and rides to and from campus.

Full- and part-time students also felt that family support was meaningful to their persistence. Full-time students described their familial relationships as encouraging and indicated that parents, spouses, and children "pushed" them to pursue a college education. Part-time students described their familial relationships as expectant. Students felt they were "expected" to be successful in college either because their parents had not been or because their families equated a college education with a secure future.

Summary

Findings indicate that first-year, persisting full- and part-time students did not perceive that early connections, as defined in this study, played a significant role in their persistence. However, participants revealed a number of factors they perceived as positively impacting their persistence: academic support, family support, social influences, and academic success.

Chapter five will analyze the findings, offer recommendations for the host community college, discuss implications of the findings, and suggest topics for future research.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Discussion

Chapter four presented the findings of first-year, persisting, full- and part-time, students' perceptions of early connections and the role those connections played in their persistence. Chapter five will analyze those findings, offer recommendations, and discusses implications for research and practice.

Data collected from one focus group and 22 semi-structured interviews with full- and part-time students revealed that neither full- nor part-time students perceived that early connections, as defined in this study, played a role in their persistence. Students perceived that a number of other factors played a role in their persistence: academic support, family support, social influences, and their own first semester academic success.

Both full- and part-time students felt that academic support, family support, and social influences played a role in their persistence. Full-time students also believed that first semester academic success was the most important factor in their persistence.

The role of academic, social, and family support is well documented in persistence literature and will be discussed in the context of this study. In addition, the researcher will revisit early connections as defined by the Survey of Entering Student Engagement and provide impressions of why they may not have played a role in persistence in this particular community college, and finally, the researcher will discuss the implications of this study for practice and future research.

Academic Support

According to Tinto (1975; 1987; 1993), the more students are integrated into the academic and social aspects of the institution, the more likely they are to persist. Pascarella (1980) and Upcraft and Gardner (1989) also found that relationships between student and faculty were important to persistence. “The freshman’s most critical transition period occurs during the first two to six weeks,” and “the quality and responsiveness of faculty and staff may be the most powerful resources available for improving student success and persistence” (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989, p. 66).

In this study, both full- and part-time students felt that faculty support made a positive difference in their persistence. Part-time students felt that faculty support was the most critical factor in their persistence. When part-time students considered dropping out, faculty support was the key reason these students persisted. Given a limited amount of campus interaction for part-time students and their primary focus on attending classes, it stands to reason they perceived faculty as the most important institutional connection.

Social Influences

Social integration into the collegiate environment is an important influence in student satisfaction and persistence (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1993; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993), and according to Astin (1977), student involvement causes a greater amount of change for entering freshman than any other factor. According to Berger and Milem (1999), students who do not get involved early in the fall semester are more likely to stay uninvolved for the entire year, and “they are less likely to perceive the

institution or their peers as supportive, less likely to become integrated, and as a result less likely to persist" (p. 658).

Both full- and part-time students felt that participating in campus activities and student organizations early in the first semester and making friends helped them better connect to the campus environment. Students who participated in campus activities felt like they "belonged" in this particular institution, and peer involvement and friendships provided support, encouragement, and motivation for full- and part-time students to continue their education.

Family Support

Research indicates that family support is an important factor in college persistence (Bean, 2005; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Deli-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). Full- and part-time students in the study also felt that family support played a role in their persistence. Full-time students described family support in terms of encouragement, and part-time students described family support in terms of expectation. More part-time than full-time students had parents who did not pursue or complete a college program or degree, which may have had some influence on why there was a difference in the perception of family support. For those who are first-generation, which Chen and Carroll (2005) define as "the first members of their families to attend college" (p. iii), research indicates that, in general, these students are less academically prepared and come from low-income families (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996).

In the study, two-thirds of part-time students had parents who had not completed a college degree, and at least one-third of part-time students commented that their parents felt it was important that they complete their college education.

Academic Success

According to Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth (2004), academic self-confidence is positively correlated to grade performance and retention in college, and students who are confident about being successful in the academic environment are more likely to persist. In the study, full-time students indicated that academic success in the first semester had the greatest overall impact on their persistence. Making good grades and mastering the subject matter gave them the confidence to re-enroll.

Revisiting Early Connections

As noted previously, first-year, persisting, full- and part-time students, who participated in this study, did not perceive that early connections, as identified by the Survey of Entering Student Engagement, played a role in their persistence. It is important to reiterate that all six of the SENSE benchmarks are integral to learning about early engagement; however, this study only focused on perceptions of early connections. The study did not investigate the remaining five benchmarks: high expectations and aspirations, clear academic plan and pathway, effective track to college readiness, engaged learning, and academic and social support network. It is also important to note that SENSE early connections questions are based primarily on students' experiences with the advising and financial aid processes.

Many full- and part-time students came to the institution with knowledge about financial aid and the majority of communication and information regarding the financial aid process is primarily handled online and via email. Given that many students and their parents are well-versed in managing the FAFSA process and there is little one-on-one personal contact with the financial aid office, it is reasonable to assume that students would not necessarily view this interaction as important to their persistence.

Like those seeking financial aid, many full- and part-time students, who sought advising, came to the institution with information about degree programs and classes and had an academic goal in mind. In the first semester, all but one student saw an academic advisor at least once; however, students were not assigned to a specific advisor, and if they had follow-up questions, they often asked for help from a different advisor. In this particular institution, students had a variety of advising options. They sought guidance via a scheduled appointment, through email, via instant messaging, or through quick question advising. Although both full- and part-time students would like more information about navigating the campus environment, both groups were pleased with the quality of advising they received.

Implications for Research and Practice

Research. Over the last forty years, foundational retention studies (Astin 1975, 1977, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Spady, 1970, 1971; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1987,

1993); have served as the underpinning of persistence theory for higher education; however, the vast majority of those studies are quantitative in nature and conducted in a university setting. This qualitative research study, which was conducted in a suburban community college, was conducted with full- and part-time community college students to gain insight into students' perceptions of how early connections impact persistence.

Currently, community colleges enroll nearly half of all undergraduates and yet, nearly 50% do not persist to the second year. Prominent retention research focuses on dropout behavior, but as community colleges commit to the Completion Agenda, which calls for a 50% increase in completion rates by 2020, it is imperative that community college leaders understand why community college students persist. Given the challenging economic times, it is imperative that educational leaders focus resources on retention services, programs, and practices that work.

Practice. This qualitative study was rooted in Interpretivism, which has been characterized as "an understanding of a particular situation or context much more than the discovery of universal laws" (Willis, 2007, p. 99). Based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed and not discovered (Glesne, 2006; Willis, 2007), this study sought to understand students' perceptions of early campus connections and the role those connections played in persistence in a single community college.

This research, although narrow in scope, focused on understanding persistence from the point of view of the student. Full and part-time students bring varying backgrounds and perspectives, and it is important to consider how both groups perceive

their early campus experiences. Often times, community colleges design course offerings, programs, and services to fit the traditional, full-time student; however; nationally, part-time students comprise 60% of community college enrollment, and those numbers are increasing. Understanding what matters to both full- and part-time students is the first step in designing effective data driven, retention strategies, programs, and services. The host community college developed and implemented a number of intentional connection strategies and student input enabled the researcher to provide a few recommendations for consideration:

Telephone calls to new students. Students who received a “welcome" call prior to the start of their first semester felt special because someone at the college took time to make sure they were prepared for the first day of class. Given that the majority of students did not remember receiving calls, perhaps the college could recruit additional volunteers to make calls and follow-up with personal text or e-mail messages.

Welcome week. As discussed, welcome week offers an important early connection opportunity for new students; however, due to classes and work schedules, some part-time evening students were not able to participate. The college may want to extend welcome week activities to accommodate part-time evening students. Offering activities in the hour before most evening classes begin may provide more part-time students an opportunity to be part of the festivities.

Designating advising/enrollment days. Both full- and part-time students discussed their frustration with long lines and wait times for advising. Students also commented on issues they encountered with online registration and the telephone system. A part-time student suggested that the college designate specific days and times for advising based on enrollment status. Days and times would be designated for new and returning students. For advising and registration, the college may also designate days and times by enrollment status and last name.

Connecting new students with recent graduates. A part-time student returning to pursue a new career field suggested that the college provide new students an opportunity to learn from recent graduates who are working in their career field. When new students connect with recent graduates and are able to see a glimpse of their future, it may encourage them to make the most of their academic experiences and complete their programs.

Compass test preparation. Two students commented on their frustration with the Compass test and being placed in developmental courses. Perhaps the college could provide more information about the importance of doing well on the Compass placement test and an opportunity to take a preparation course or workshop prior to testing. The Compass is used to place students in reading, writing, and math courses, and it is important that students perform well. Otherwise, low scores in one or more areas may require a student to spend a semester or more in developmental course work. Both

students were discouraged about the time they were spending in classes that did not count toward their degrees.

Implications for Future Research

This study was conducted in a single, suburban community college with first-year, persisting full- and part-time students. The researcher attempted to reach a diverse group of first-year, persisting full- and part-time students; however, the majority of part-time students, who volunteered for the study, fit the profile of "part-time students who looked like full-time students." According to Chen and Carroll (2007), these students are recent high school graduates, 23 or younger, and financially dependent on their parents. Typical part-time community college students would generally fit the profile of exclusively part-time students which Chen and Carroll (2007) describe as financially independent and more likely to be first-generation and/or minority.

Given the narrow scope, small sample size and composition, and geographical designation of this study, perhaps taking a much broader approach would yield new and different insights about part-time community college students:

1. Replicate the study in urban and rural settings, broaden the scope to include early connections beyond the SENSE, increase the sample size, and focus on exclusively part-time students in various ethnic groups.

In addition, full-time students felt that academic success in the first semester was instrumental in their persistence:

2. Exploring the notion of academic self-confidence might provide greater insight into how academic self- confidence translates into program/degree completion in the community college setting.

Visiting with both full- and part-time students and learning about their personal struggles prompted me to think more about the impact of academic resiliency:

3. What part does academic resiliency play in college completion and how might community college leaders develop and implement strategies that promote academic resiliency on community college campuses?

In 2011/2012, entering part-time students who identify with two or more races had the lowest first-to second semester retention rates; however, full-time students who identify with two or more races had the highest first-to-second semester retention rates. Given this dichotomy, it would be interesting to understand why this particular group has the highest full-time and lowest part-time retention first semester retention rates:

4. Which ethnicities do those who persist and those who do not identify with and how does ethnicity and enrollment status affect persistence for these students?

Conclusion

This research study attempted to qualitatively describe first year, persisting full- and part-time students' perceptions of early campus connections and the role those connections played in their persistence. Using a qualitative research approach afforded full- and part-time students an opportunity to offer a real world view of how they perceive early connections that lead to persistence in the community college. Gaining

insights and understanding of both full- and part-time student perceptions will further inform the existing literature and provide valuable insights for the host community college and practitioners who are committed to helping community college students meet their educational goals.

Appendix A

Interview/Focus Group Questions

The following is a list of the kinds of potential questions which will be asked in focus groups and individual interviews. For clarification purposes, participants may be asked related follow-up questions.

Follow-up questions may be phrased such that participants are asked to more fully describe and/or elaborate on their original responses or provide additional information about comments or ideas that are expressed during the focus group/interview process.

1. Describe the reasons that led you to enroll in this particular community college.

2. Tell me about your first visit to the campus. (probe on whether it was organized session for newcomers or just a visit on their part) What kinds of things did you do and how did you feel about the experience?

3. During your first time on campus, where did you feel the most comfortable and why? How do you feel about the Commons and Campus Center?

4. What "word or phrase" comes to mind when you think of your early college experiences? How does that that word/phrase relate to your experience?

5. Within the first three weeks, did any college staff member (other than an instructor) help you in a memorable way? Do you recall welcome week? Did anyone call you before classes started to connect with you? Did you reach out to anyone before classes started to get familiar with the campus?

6. Is there a specific person at the college whom you contact when you have questions or need help? How did you come to know this individual?

7. Tell me about your experience with advising? What did you find most useful about your advising experience?

8. How did you learn about financial aid (loans, grants, scholarships)?

9. How did you learn whether you qualified for financial aid and scholarships?

10. Tell me about your experience with the financial aid process. Did the information that you received from college staff enable you to complete the application process?

11. Within your first six weeks on campus, what kinds of activities or events (if any) did you participate in? Did participating help you to connect with the campus environment and feel confident/good about your choice to attend this college?

12. Within your first six weeks on campus, were there situations, activities, or events (if any) that disappointed or upset you and possibly made you question your decision to attend this college?

13. During your first semester, did you ever think about dropping out? If so, can you tell me what was happening during that time? What helped you decide to stay?

14. Within your first semester here, what influences (peer relationships, faculty, staff, administration), do you feel have contributed to your persistence at the college? Was there any particular person, activity, event, etc. that influenced your decision to continue at the college?

15. How did your friends and acquaintances influence your decision to return to college? Do you know friends who decided not to return? Do you have any idea why they did not return?

16. As you reflect on your first semester, can you tell me what had the greatest impact on your decision to re-enroll/continue?

17. What could this college do to improve the advising and financial aid experiences for students?

Appendix B

Demographic Data Form

1. Which of these did you earn? High school diploma, GED, certificate of completion, other?

2. Did you begin classes at this college in the same year that you graduated from high school, received your GED, or certificate of completion? If not, how long did you wait to begin classes?

3. In fall, 2011, did you enroll full-time (12 credit hours or more) or part-time (fewer than 12 credit hours)?

4. What is your age?

5. What is your marital status: single, married, separated, or divorced?

6. Do you have dependent children? If yes, how many?

7. Are you the primary caregiver for children, parents, or siblings?

8. What is the highest level of education for each of your parents?

   Mother:
   Father:

9. Do you work outside of the home while attending this college? If so, approximately how many hours a week?

10. To which race/ethnic classification do you identify?

11. What is your gender?

12. If you currently receive or if you received financial aid in Fall, 2011, please list the sources/categories (grants, loans, scholarships, other).

13. Do your parents/guardians assist you with educational/living expenses?

14. In fall, 2011, did you have a declared major?

15. Do you plan to earn an associate degree from this college?

16. Do you plan to earn a certificate from this college?

17. Do you plan to transfer to a four-year college/university without earning a degree or certificate from this college?

18. Do you plan to transfer to a four-year college/university after earning a degree or certificate from this college?

Appendix C

IRB APPROVED ON: 12/16/2011 **EXPIRES ON: 12/15/2012**
IRB # 2011-10-0061

Consent for Participation in Research

Title: College Connections: An Investigation of First-Year, Persisting, Full-Time and Part-Time Students' Perceptions at a Suburban Community College

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

Purpose of the Study
You have been asked to participate in a research study about perceptions of early campus experiences. The purpose of this study is learn how full-time and part-time community college students perceive early connection strategies. The study will include interviews, focus groups, and document analysis.

What will you to be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to

1.Complete a personal background/demographic sheet and consent form, and participate in either a focus group or a semi-structured interview. For students participating in focus groups, they should allot 1 hour and 15 minutes of time for the study: one hour for the focus group and 15 minutes to complete the necessary forms. For students participating in a one-on-one interview, they should allot 45 minutes of time for the study: 30 minutes for the interview and 15 minutes to complete the necessary forms.

If you are selected to participate in the focus group, you will be in a room (on-campus) with approximately 6-8 other students and the researcher. Questions will be posed and students will have an opportunity to respond to question and/or make comments. Questions will be posed; however, you should feel welcome not to respond to questions that you are uncomfortable responding to. During the focus group, your name will not be used. The focus group should last approximately one hour.

If you are selected for a semi-structured interview, you will be meeting on-one-one with the researcher in a designated space on campus. You will be asked the same questions that will be asked of students in the focus group. You will only be asked to respond to questions that you feel comfortable responding to. If you are not comfortable responding, you are welcome not to respond.

The full study will include approximately 25-28 participants.

Your participation will be audio recorded; however, the audio recording will only be used for transcription purposes. Each participant will be assigned a number that corresponds to a pseudonym. There will be no personally identifiable information recorded or visible on the audio tape or recording device. The audio recording will be kept in a secure location that is accessible only by the researcher (locked filing cabinet in a locked office not at the site) and will not be made available publicly or shared with anyone beyond the transcriptionist. The recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed or coded and will only be kept for the period of time deemed necessary by The University of Texas Institutional Review Board.

What are the risks involved in this study? There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study. You are welcome to end your participation at any point in time.

IRB APPROVED ON: 12/16/2011 **EXPIRES ON: 12/15/2012**
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What are the possible benefits of this study?
Participants will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, this study may help community college administrators learn how students perceive early connection strategies. The information gleaned from the study may ultimately help community college administrators develop more effective early connection strategies.

Do you have to participate?
No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin (University) in any way.

If you would like to participate, please bring this form to your interview or focus group meeting. You will receive a copy of this form.

Will there be any compensation?
You will receive a $10 gift certificate for your willingness to participate. The gift certificate will be provided when the participant reaches the interview/focus group location.

What are my confidentiality or privacy protections when participating in this research study?
This study is confidential and participants will not be identified in the study. The identities of participants will be kept confidential via the use of pseudonyms throughout the research document. Personal and background sheets will be coded with numbers that correspond to pseudonyms created by the researcher.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the researcher and transcriptionist will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for the duration of the study as required by the UT Austin Institutional Review Board and then destroyed. The data resulting from your participation may be used for future research or be made available to other researchers for research purposes not detailed within this consent form.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?
Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher Shelia Mauppin at 402-440-6407 or send an email to smauppin@gmail.com. This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is 2011-10-0061.

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?
For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

Participation: All participants must be at least 18 years of age

IRB APPROVED ON: 12/16/2011 **EXPIRES ON: 12/15/2012**
IRB # 2011-10-0061

Signature
You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

_____
Printed Name

_____ _____
Signature Date

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

_____
Print Name of Person obtaining consent

_____ _____
Signature of Person obtaining consent Date

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